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Mennonite Church USA Delegate Assembly
Lifestyle and Sustainability
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Presenters:

Anita Amstutz, Pastor, Albuquerque (N.M.) Mennonite Church
Luke Gascho, Executive Director, Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College

Our input on the theme –“Creation Care and Sustainable Actions” – grows out of questions raised two years ago at the Assembly in Charlotte. Seventeen delegates signed a statement requesting dialog and commitment concerning sustainability and creation care at this Assembly in San Jose. Today, Anita and I are sharing input based on four questions. The first question is:

I. What is the connection between creation care and sustainability?

As followers of Christ, we are called to care for all God has entrusted to us (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). The full entrustment includes all of creation—and specifically the earth—our home. This stewardship responsibility is not one of debate, but rather of discernment. Discerning how to be the best stewards of the earth requires us to have a good understanding of our place within both the local and global context.

As stated in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, we have been given three relational roles. “Human beings have been made for relationship with God, to live in peace with each other, and to take care of the rest of creation.” While the main focus of our input is on caring for creation, we see it within the framework of our relationship with God and the need for peace between all people.

Being earthkeepers and stewards of creation are roles we that we as people of faith should be honored to fulfill. But we have often become takers from the earth, rather than care givers. It is in the context of our responsibility to care for God’s creation that we consider the need for sustainable actions.

Sustainability means meeting the needs of all people and all of creation today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. We are not achieving this objective in the present—nor in preparation for the future. Our consumptive lifestyles have the earth’s systems out of balance.

David Orr states, “[Sustainable actions involve] the careful meshing of human purposes with the larger patterns and flows of the natural world, and careful study of those patterns and flows to inform human purposes.” Do we know these patterns? Are we willing to be informed by them? Studying the regenerative nature of trees, the design of a spider’s web, and the symbiotic relationships of organisms can enhance our practices of sustainability.

As our definition notes, sustainability includes thinking and caring about future generations. This is a responsibility named repeatedly throughout scripture. For example Psalm 78 calls us to tell the next generation(s) the “glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders he has done.” The deeds of God include not only the sacred relationship with humanity, but also the relationship with all of creation. In Colossians 1:15-20, Christ is named the creator, the sustainer and the reconciler of all things. Christ models the call for us to care for all of creation, which I believe is the ideal concept of sustainability.

The second question in our framework is:

II. Why are creation care and sustainability issues today?

The answer is, “Because creation is groaning!” (Romans 8:22)

We need to be aware that there are ecological stresses on our “home” landscapes—and we are part of that stress. This stress is more than just local. It is global. Our human impact on the earth is becoming increasingly more apparent. The following items are examples of critical issues in sustainability:

1. Deforestation – from 1990 to 2005 the net forest loss globally is 18 million acres (28,000 sq. miles) per year.
2. Land - Average annual rate of agricultural land converted to developed uses in the U.S. - 1,234,560 acres.
3. Hunger - More than 840 million people in the world are malnourished — 799 million of them live in the developing world.
4. Water - Global water use has been growing at more than twice the rate of population growth in the last century. Water scarcity already affects every continent and more than 40 percent of the people on our planet.
5. Energy - Though accounting for only 5 percent of the world's population, Americans consume 26 percent of the world's energy.
6. Waste - In 2005, U.S. residents, businesses, and institutions produced more than 245 million tons of [garbage], which is approximately 4.5 pounds of waste per person per day.
7. Climate Change - As climate change translates into more intense storms, flooding, heat waves, and droughts, more and more communities will likely be affected. Desertification, for example, puts some 135 million people worldwide at risk of becoming environmental refugees.

Creation is groaning!

This list can feel like a burden too large to bear – a problem that is insurmountable. But we can assist in turning the tide by changing our consumptive behaviors and by choosing regenerative actions. Reversing these trends is possible. We have to understand and respond to the inequities and injustices found within the climate change dynamic.

As people concerned about sustainability and caring for creation, we need to follow a quality God displays as written in the *Confession*, “God preserves and renews what has been made.”

Each of us has a stewardship responsibility within our settings. But before we act, we also need to understand our beliefs, which form the basis for our call to creation care.

Our third question is:

III. What is our theological framework for caring for the earth?

I am going to speak to why we as Mennonites are called to act on this urgent issue of sustainability and global climate change, from a theological and scriptural position. I would offer that this is the greatest moral issue and dilemma of our time, upon which the future of our children's generation rests.

I want to offer three images---*Anabaptists as a Servant People, a Stewardship people, a Peace & Justice People.*

A. As Anabaptists, we are a Towel & Basin People, following our servant King, Jesus

We say in the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective that:

We believe everything belongs to God, who calls us as the church to live as faithful stewards of all that God has entrusted to us.

This article reminds us that God is ultimately the one in dominion of the earth, and we are servants to God's vision of creation and shalom—literally meaning *well-being*. Our best model for this image of servant is Jesus, the messianic “servant king”. I am reminded of the gospel of John, where Jesus took the towel and washed his disciples feet, calling them to do the same out of utter love and service to one another. What would it look like to not only wash one another's feet, but to extend our footwashing to the biotic community?

I want to talk about the scriptural basis for this concept, of humans being “servants” to the rest of the non-human creation. Let's begin with the Garden of Eden. This servant concept springs from interpretations of the Yahwist's [writer] Genesis 2 account in the Garden of Eden.

In Genesis 2:15 humans are to “till and keep the ground”. The closest Hebrew meaning of “*till*” being “*tend*” (Heb. *'abad*) meaning “to serve” the ground.¹² “*To keep*”, [Heb. *Shamar*] means “to exercise great care over”. So literally, the farmer serves and exercises great care over the arable land----- the one who *comes from the dust of the earth*, serves this earth. They are of mutual service and sustain one another.

Secondly, and I find this important, because of my love of animals----the Hebrew phrase, “*nepesh chayyah*” is used to describe the human being at creation in Genesis 2:7 **AND** the animals at creation in Gen. 2:19.¹³ This has been translated, “Living Soul” or “living being”. In each case the text obviously addresses humans and members of the animal kingdom. Strikingly, the ancient text uses the very same term for both, describing a special interdependent relationship shared by humans and animals after creation.

To illustrate this: “*St. Francis, 13th c. founder of the Franciscan monastic movement, called all creatures, no matter how small, by the name of brother and sister; because he knew they had the same source as himself*” (St. Bonaventure, 1221-1274)

I want to also take on that age old text in the Priestly account of the creation story, Genesis 1, which all of us have heard read as the following:

Genesis 1:28 “*God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’*”

The Christian church has taken this interpretation to heart for hundreds of centuries. However, the Tanakh translation, the Jewish Study Bible uses “they shall rule”, instead of “have dominion”. Instead of subdue, we find “master”[the earth].

First I would say that the idea of mastery comes from an intimate acquaintance with the earth's diversity of flora and fauna, her cycles, rhythms, seasons, times of fallowness, & renewal, rather than power over.

In his book, "*Scratching the Woodchuck*", David Kline, Amish farmer, naturalist, and essayist from NE Ohio (Holmes county to be exact!), *uses vignettes to illustrate the profuse animal life on his 120 acre farm, [his stories] are expressions of reverence and humility, not power. They serve to remind most of us modern readers how much we have lost the sense of our interrelationship with nature, which was simply part of being human in our biblical heritage.*"

Secondly, I want to examine instead what **rule** meant in the near-east landscape in which this was originally penned. The Hebrew word for "rule" **and** dominion are used throughout the scriptures to denote kingship. The ancient near-east understanding of kingship, which is ultimately God's to grant, was not about entitlement, or privilege, or unparalleled power over, it was about a deep weight of responsibility, even to the point of suffering or sacrifice for those one ruled, if needed. 15 **In Deuteronomy 17:15-20**, we have a formula for this servant king—a king who lives by God's law with humility and justice. Jesus ultimately exemplified this **servant king** model in relation to all things.

We humans, whose vocation is to rule the earth, ultimately are called to bear the **deepest weight** of responsibility, even to the point of sacrifice, if need be, for all the earth and her living beings. What a reversal of our historical human arrogance in relationship to the earth community.

B. We as Anabaptists are a Stewardship People

Consider the following from the *Confession*:

As stewards of God's earth, we are called to care for the earth and to bring rest and renewal to the land and everything that lives in it.

In this section I want to look at the ethical implications of this idea of servanthood. This biblical practice is called Stewardship. The Hebrew word for steward, **meh-shek**, means "to hold or possess".

A blueprint for humans as stewards of the earth community is found in Leviticus 25 and again in Deuteronomy 15. There we find the concept of Sabbath and Jubilee, a unique system of land ownership and economics within the ancient Hebrew community. The cycles were in 7---every 7 days you shall rest, because the Lord rested after 7 days of creation. 7 years you shall observe a Sabbath---allowing the land, animals and human to rest from labor. After 49 years (7X7) you shall enter into a 50-year Jubilee. This was designed to redistribute the land and the wealth for the common good, rather than the privileged few.

Jubilee was also about releasing debt, emancipating slaves as well as to give humans, land and animals a rest. This is a comprehensive economic plan for the well-being of all human and non-human beings as seen in the Prophet Isaiah, ch. 61, echoed again by Jesus in Luke 4, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..."

In the U.S., we live under a capitalist plan. We as a people benefit from one of the strongest economic systems in the world. Capitalism shapes and molds how we as Christians think about ourselves in terms of stewardship and economics. It is distinctly different from God's plan of **servant economics**.

It does not encourage us to extend our stewardship to all humans, land and animals, air, water, &

natural resources. Instead, as capitalists we are trained to see human potential, as well as plants, animals, land, air and water as capital/raw resources to use---expendable and utilitarian inasmuch as they serve our wants. Everything has a value only in so much as it can be bought or sold.

As Anabaptist stewards, we are called to model an alternative way of economics, God's servant economics. This alternative is seen in our projects for wellbeing [MDS, MMA, MCC, MEDA, etc.] How can we now extend God's economics to serve the earth?

C. We Anabaptists are a Peace & Justice People

The fact is, our western economics have now become globalized due to trade agreements. Much of our trade agreements are in the service of feeding our own energy and food needs by "power over" and violence against nature and other human beings.

We as an Anabaptist people, Peace & Justice people are called to a different vision, God's servant economics.

Article 24. The Reign of God:

We believe that the church is called to live now according to the model of the future reign of God. The church is to be a spiritual, social and economic reality, demonstrating now the justice, righteousness, love and peace of the age to come.

From Genesis to Psalms to Revelation, we see the Divine Imagination for creation. **In Revelation 21, 22**, John of Patmos' dream of a new heaven and a new earth is where God dwells absolutely. God's glory lights the people's way and the moon & sun are no longer needed. The gates always open, and there is a glorious image of the river of life with fruiting trees, for the healing of the nations. It is a vision of the human and non-human all bowing to worship and serve the One God. The vision of Shalom is interwoven with creation images—human and nonhuman alike.

As a people of peace and justice, I leave you with a question: **How do we live this alternative image of Shalom with all of God's creation, human and nonhuman alike---instead of the current of dominion as "domination", "power over" and violence against, which governs our societies?**

Our fourth question is:

IV. How should we respond?

Our convention theme, "Live the Call" from Ephesians 4 includes the phrase, "... with all humility." The word humble is derived from the concepts of humus, the ground, and the earth. We are connected to the earth. Humility will help us understand how we can live in balance with nature.

A way to understand the ethical challenge of being in balance with nature is to consider a spectrum of views regarding our relationship with the earth. At one end of the continuum is the concept of a "Wild Earth." This is defined by the ideas of the earth being untouchably sacred; fewer people and more nature is best; protecting and revering the earth is of prime importance. At the other end of the spectrum is the understanding of the earth as "Nature Factory." The main concepts of this view are to see the earth as a resource for a technological and industrial economy—with the human role to tame, subdue and extract.

I am not comfortable with either extreme. At the same time I see how I am drawn to each. As an alternative ethic I propose a third view. Consider the concept of “Earth as Home” – a place that we care for. Defining components include a moral ecology of interacting with nature; practicing concepts like agroecology and sustainability. Are we willing to learn from earth’s great wisdom? This is the wisdom found in ecosystems, creatures and nature. It is also the wisdom found in God’s relationship with all things.

In conclusion we issue the call to practice sustainability. A first step in changing is to determine our ecological footprint as individuals, congregations, and agencies. What are the amounts of energy, water, and resources that we consume in maintaining our lifestyle? A second step is to identify how we can reduce or eliminate our direct and indirect environmental impacts. A handout on your table gives more detailed examples of areas to explore. We need wisdom and courage to act on the sustainable concept of living simply.

Theodore Hiebert states, “The stresses of the landscapes in which we live are forcing all of us, regardless of our hometowns and politics and religions, to reconsider our actions and the impact that they have on our neighborhoods. We have begun the search for a style of life that will restore these landscapes to health and sustain them so that we, our children, and our grandchildren will thrive in them.” May all of God’s creation thrive.