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Episcopal Church House of Bishops issues A Pastoral Teaching
September 20, 2011
By: The Public Affairs Office

The Episcopal Church House of Bishops, meeting in Province IX, in Quito, Ecuador, issued the following Pastoral Teaching:

A Pastoral Teaching from the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church

Quito, Ecuador
September 2011

We, your bishops, believe these words of Jeremiah describe these times and call us to repentance as we face the unfolding environmental crisis of the earth:

How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who live in it the animals and the birds are swept away, and because people said, "He is blind to our ways." (Jeremiah 12:4)

The mounting urgency of our environmental crisis challenges us at this time to confess "our self-indulgent appetites and ways," "our waste and pollution of God's creation," and "our lack of concern for those who come after us" (Ash Wednesday Liturgy, Book of Common Prayer, p. 268). It also challenges us to amend our lives and to work for environmental justice and for more environmentally sustainable practices.

Christians cannot be indifferent to global warming, pollution, natural resource depletion, species extinctions, and habitat destruction, all of which threaten life on our planet. Because so many of these threats are driven by greed, we must also actively seek to create more compassionate and sustainable economies that support the well-being of all God's creation.

We are especially called to pay heed to the suffering of the earth. The Anglican Communion Environmental Network calls to mind the dire consequences our environment faces: "We know that . . . we are now demanding more than [the earth] is able to provide. Science confirms what we already know: our human footprint is changing the face of the earth and because we come from the earth, it is changing us too. We are engaged in the process of destroying our very being. If we cannot live in harmony with the earth, we will not live in harmony with one another." (i)

This is the appointed time for all God's children to work for the common goal of renewing the earth as a hospitable abode for the flourishing of all life. We are called to speak and act on behalf of God's good creation.

Looking back to the creation accounts in Genesis, we see God's creation was "very good," providing all that humans would need for abundant, peaceful life. In creating the world God's loving concern extended to the whole of it, not just to humans. And the scope of God's redemptive love in Christ is equally broad: the Word became incarnate in Christ not just for our sake, but for the salvation of the whole world. In the

Book of Revelation we read that God will restore the goodness and completeness of creation in the “new Jerusalem.” Within this new city, God renews and redeems the natural world rather than obliterating it. We now live in that time between God’s creation of this good world and its final redemption: “The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for . . . the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:22-3).

Affirming the biblical witness to God’s abiding and all-encompassing love for creation, we recognize that we cannot separate ourselves as humans from the rest of the created order. The creation story itself presents the interdependence of all God’s creatures in their wonderful diversity and fragility, and in their need of protection from dangers of many kinds. This is why the Church prays regularly for the peace of the whole world, for seasonable weather and an abundance of the fruits of the earth, for a just sharing of resources, and for the safety of all who suffer. This includes our partner creatures: animals, birds, and fish who are being killed or made sick by the long-term effects of deforestation, oil spills, and a host of other ways in which we intentionally and unintentionally destroy or poison their habitat.

One of the most dangerous and daunting challenges we face is global climate change. This is, at least in part, a direct result of our burning of fossil fuels. Such human activities could raise worldwide average temperatures by three to eleven degrees Fahrenheit in this century. Rising average temperatures are already wreaking environmental havoc, and, if unchecked, portend devastating consequences for every aspect of life on earth.

The Church has always had as one of its priorities a concern for the poor and the suffering. Therefore, we need not agree on the fundamental causes of human devastation of the environment, or on what standard of living will allow sustainable development, or on the roots of poverty in any particular culture, in order to work to minimize the impact of climate change. It is the poor and the disadvantaged who suffer most from callous environmental irresponsibility. Poverty is both a local and a global reality. A healthy economy depends absolutely on a healthy environment.

The wealthier nations whose industries have exploited the environment, and who are now calling for developing nations to reduce their impact on the environment, seem to have forgotten that those who consume most of the world’s resources also have contributed the most pollution to the world’s rivers and oceans, have stripped the world’s forests of healing trees, have destroyed both numerous species and their habitats, and have added the most poison to the earth’s atmosphere. We cannot avoid the conclusion that our irresponsible industrial production and consumption-driven economy lie at the heart of the current environmental crisis.

Privileged Christians in our present global context need to move from a culture of consumerism to a culture of conservation and sharing. The challenge is to examine one’s own participation in ecologically destructive habits. Our churches must become places where we have honest debates about, and are encouraged to live into, more sustainable ways of living. God calls us to die to old ways of thinking and living and be raised to new life with renewed hearts and minds.

Although many issues divide us as people of faith, unprecedented ecumenical and interfaith cooperation is engaging the concern to protect our planet. And yet, efforts to stop environmental degradation must not be simply imposed from above. Those most affected must have a hand in shaping decisions. For example, we welcome efforts in the United States to involve Native American tribal leaders and to empower local community organizations to address environmental issues. Similar strategies need to be employed in myriad communities in various locales.

Our current environmental challenges call us to ongoing forms of repentance: we must turn ourselves around, and come to think, feel, and act in new ways. Ancient wisdom and spiritual disciplines from our faith offer deep resources to help address this environmental crisis. Time-honored practices of fasting, Sabbath-keeping, and Christ-centered mindfulness bear particular promise for our time.

Fasting disciplines and heals our wayward desires and appetites, calling us to balance our individual needs with God's will for the whole world. In fasting we recognize that human hungers require more than filling the belly. In God alone are our desires finally fulfilled. Commended in the Book of Common Prayer, fasting is grounded in the practices of Israel, taught by Jesus, and sustained in Christian tradition. The ecological crisis extends and deepens the significance of such fasting as a form of self-denial: those who consume more than their fair share must learn to exercise self-restraint so that the whole community of creation might be sustained.

Sabbath-keeping is rooted in the Book of Genesis, where the seventh day is the day in which God, humans, and the rest of creation are in right relationship. In our broken world, keeping the Sabbath is a way of remembering and anticipating that world for which God created us. Sabbath requires rest, that we might remember our rightful place as God's creatures in relationship with every other creature of God. Such rest implicitly requires humans to live lightly on the face of the earth, neither to expend energy nor to consume it, not to work for gain alone, but to savor the grace and givenness of creation.

The practice of Christ-centered mindfulness, that is, the habitual recollection of Christ, calls believers to a deepened awareness of the presence of God in their own lives, in other people, and in every aspect of the world around us. Such spiritual perception should make faithful people alert to the harmful effects of our lifestyles, attentive to our carbon footprint (ii) and to the dangers of overconsumption. It should make us profoundly aware of the gift of life and less prone to be ecologically irresponsible in our consumption and acquisition. In assuming with new vigor our teaching office, we, your bishops, commit ourselves to a renewal of these spiritual practices in our own lives, and invite you to join us in this commitment for the good of our souls and the life of the world. Moreover, in order to honor the goodness and sacredness of God's creation, we, as brothers and sisters in Christ, commit ourselves and urge every Episcopalian:

To acknowledge the urgency of the planetary crisis in which we find ourselves, and to repent of any and all acts of greed, overconsumption, and waste that have contributed to it;

To lift up prayers in personal and public worship for environmental justice, for sustainable development, and for help in restoring right relations both among humankind and between humankind and the rest of creation;

To take steps in our individual lives, and in community, public policy, business, and other forms of corporate decision-making, to practice environmental stewardship and justice, including (1) a commitment to energy conservation and the use of clean, renewable sources of energy; and (2) efforts to reduce, reuse, and recycle, and whenever possible to buy products made from recycled materials;

To seek to understand and uproot the political, social, and economic causes of environmental destruction and abuse; (iii)

To advocate for a "fair, ambitious, and binding" climate treaty, and to work toward climate justice through reducing our own carbon footprint and advocating for those most negatively affected by climate change.

May God give us the grace to heed the warnings of Jeremiah and to accept the gracious invitation of the incarnate Word to live, in, with, and through him, a life of grace for the whole world, that thereby all the

earth may be restored and humanity filled with hope. Rejoicing in your works, O Lord, send us forth with your Spirit to renew the face of the earth, that the world may once again be filled with your good things: the trees watered abundantly, springs rushing between the hills in verdant valleys, all the earth made fruitful, your manifold creatures, birds, beasts, and humans, all quenching their thirst and receiving their nourishment from you once again in due season (Psalm 104).

(i) From “The Hope We Share: A Vision for Copenhagen,” a statement from the Anglican Communion Environmental Network in preparation for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), December 2009.

(ii) Carbon footprint is a measurement of all greenhouse gases we individually produce in our day-to-day lives through burning fossil fuels for electricity, heating, transportation, etc.

(iii) We are indebted to the Episcopal Bishops of New England for their earlier 2003 Pastoral Letter, “To Serve Christ in All Creation.” Several of these “commitments” and other phrases herein are quotations or adaptations of their work.