

The Earth is the Lord's – Not Ours to Ruin: Priorities for a New Moral Era

Recommendation:

The Presbytery of Monmouth overtures the 223rd General Assembly (2018) to:

1. Call upon the whole church to raise a prophetic voice regarding the urgency of healing the climate of the earth, our home and God's gift for the future of all life, human and nonhuman.
2. Call upon the whole church to engage prayerfully with the following priorities as we seek to initiate a new moral era:
 - a. **Let our clergy accept the mantle of moral leadership.** Now is the time for clergy to speak from their pulpits about the moral obligation of our generation to protect God's creation. Let the world know that we who follow Jesus will not back away from God's call to protect our common home. When the powers that be deny or obscure the truth, we followers of Jesus will proclaim the truth to protect our common home.
 - b. **Let all of us incarnate the changes for which we long.** Now is the time for congregations and for every person of faith to set a moral example through our own words and actions. As individuals and as communities, let us commit to making decisions of integrity in our energy choices, even as we commit to hold all our religious, political, corporate, and global leaders accountable to do the same.
 - c. **Let us proclaim truth in the public square.** We are now living in a John 18:37 moment, in which we must hold to the truth we understand from the Bible and from the sacred book of nature, recognizing that when truth is compromised, only power prevails.
 - Let our communities of faith be bold and courageous as we address one of the greatest moral challenge that the world has ever faced.
 - Let us do all we can to change America's understanding of the story that our generation is writing. Let us begin a new story – a story that is not dependent on increased greenhouse gas emissions or on wealth for the few and misery for the many.

This overture was inspired and based on the resolution, "The Earth is the Lord's – Not Ours to Wreck, Imperatives for a New Moral Era" passed by the United Church of Christ National Synod on July 3, 2017. Now is the time to encourage deeper ecumenical cooperation to lift up our collective moral voice.

Accepting that it is up to us, whether in the streets, at our State Houses, in the halls of power, with our phones, emails, technology and social media by committing our time, financial resources and prayers – let us pour ourselves out to bend the moral arc of justice, with joy in our hearts, beauty in our sights, and hope for the children.

Rationale:

God's great gift of Creation – the context in which all life seeks fulfillment – is in crisis. Driven by material aspiration, humanity's use of fossil fuels since the Industrial Revolution has broken Creation's balance. The scale of Creation's demise is dramatically expanding beyond our comprehension. Never

has the earth and the climate changed so quickly. While the leaders of every country in the world recognize this reality, our current Administration ignores science, defunds the Environmental Protection Agency, and withdraws from the Paris Climate Accord. As people of faith, recognizing that the earth is the Lord's, it falls upon our generation to embrace the priorities set forth in this resolution – priorities that constitute a new moral era. The current climate crisis is an opportunity for which the church was born.

The leaders of over 190 countries have signed the Paris Climate Accord, acknowledging the critical role every country must play if the life-sustaining climate of the earth is to continue to sustain life as we have always known it. The Accord brings all countries together to work on combating climate change and adapting to its effects, with a particular effort on helping the least of these, who are affected most severely. As Christians we are meant to be in relationship, and withdrawing from the Accord breaks our relationship with all countries in this effort. Our cities, states, business and colleges and universities are stepping up to provide American leadership. As of October 1, 2017, 15 states, 455 cities, 1,747 businesses and 325 institutions of higher learning belong to networks that support the Paris Accord. Additionally, 20 states, 110 cities and 1,300+ businesses have set greenhouse gases reduction targets. (<https://www.americaspledgeonclimate.com/>). For over 50 years the PCUSA, along with religious leaders from other faiths and denominations, has issued statements on the goodness of Creation and our call to act as responsible stewards, all of which has been an insufficient witness. This historic moment provides Christian communities with a powerful opportunity to bear witness to the sacredness of God's Creation and the urgent call to preserve it.

In 1990 the 202nd General Assembly approved “Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice.” It stated:

“Therefore, God calls the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to

- respond to the cry of creation, human and nonhuman;
- engage in the effort to make the 1990s the "turnaround decade," not only for reasons of prudence or survival, but because the endangered planet is God's creation; and
- draw upon all the resources of biblical faith and the Reformed tradition for empowerment and guidance in this adventure.”

This was the response to:

“Creation cries out in this time of ecological crisis.

- Abuse of nature and injustice to people place the future in grave jeopardy.
- Population triples in this century.
- Biological systems suffer diminished capacity to renew themselves.
- Finite minerals are mined and pumped as if inexhaustible.
- Peasants are forced onto marginal lands, and soil erodes.
- The rich - poor gap grows wider.
- Wastes and poisons exceed nature's capacity to absorb them.
- Greenhouse gases pose threat of global warming.”

Finally,

“the 202nd General Assembly (1990)

- recognizes and accepts restoring creation as a central concern of the church, to be incorporated into its life and mission at every level;
- understands this to be a new focus for initiative in mission program and a concern with major implications for infusion into theological work, evangelism, education, justice and peacemaking, *worship and liturgy, public witness*, global mission, and congregational service and action at the local community level;

- recognizes that restoring creation is not a short-term concern to be handled in a few years, but a continuing task to which the nation and the world must give attention and commitment, and which has profound implications for the life, work, and witness of Christian people and church agencies;

While the 1990's was designated the "turnaround decade", creation continues to cry for many of the same reasons identified in 1990. It is time for the church to renew its focus on creation cares as a mission initiative that infuses all of our work, particularly our preaching of the Word, and our speaking truth to power.

In 2008, the General Assembly approved "The Power to Change," which urged the whole church to "become models of energy-efficient institutions and proponents of renewable energy" and to advocate "before local, state, and federal governments for public policies that encourage energy efficiency and renewable energy generation." It is time to study the recommendations in this resolution again in light of our current environmental situation. In the accompanying letter, Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly at the time, wrote: "Can we hear the grave warnings in reports like this one from Christians who have carefully studied these matters? And then can we act as stewards of God's earth, witnessing to Christ in the re-direction of our lives toward a more sustainable future? I pray that we can, and that our church's good work can help in this great change."

Scripture informs this work as well, from creation in pain, to understanding our vocation, to understanding that advocacy is a requirement.

Romans 8: 19-23 (NRSV)

¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.

Psalms 8: 3-8 (NRSV)

³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
⁴ what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
⁵ Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
⁶ You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
⁷ all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

John 18:37-38 (NRSV)

³⁷ Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." ³⁸ Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him."

For a deeper understanding of the Biblical and theological foundations for earth care, see “And the Leaves of the Tree are for the Healing of the Nations” by Carol Johnston.

(<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/and-leaves-tree-are-healing-nations/>)