



THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

A statement adopted by the Fifth General Convention
of The American Lutheran Church, October 1970

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(Adopted by the Fifth General Convention of The American Lutheran Church, October 21-27, 1970, "as a statement expressing the judgment and corporate conviction of The American Lutheran Church as its contribution to the discussions seeking an informed solution to a difficult problem of contemporary life and society.")

1. The rapid deterioration of the natural environment has become a matter of great concern for many Americans. Scientists tell us that we have only a few decades before many of our air, water, and land resources are polluted to a point of no return. Both mass media coverage and statements by government officials have made concern about the quality of our environment a major national issue. Citizens individually and in groups have become aroused about the possible ill effects of air and water pollution, the use of pesticides, and the production and use of nuclear energy. Concern is expressed whether the supply of such natural resources as minerals, forests, agricultural land, and outdoor recreational areas will continue to meet growing population and industrial demands.

2. The issues raised by concern for the environment among government, business, industry, and individual citizens are enormously complex. Ecologists (who study the relationship of organisms to their environment) have shown how every human decision affects the complex web of relationships that sustains natural processes. Policy decisions about our use of natural resources reflect the basic values by which our civilization lives. As Christians, therefore, we are concerned to participate in discussions and decisions about the human use of the earth in ways that reflect our Christian faith and values.

The Roots of the Environmental Crisis

3. The dramatic growth of human population has placed enormous pressure upon the physical environment. It took thousands of years for human population to reach one billion around 1850. By 1960 it reached three and a half billion. At the present rate of increase the earth's human population will double in the next 30 years! Population growth was a natural way of aiding the survival of earlier human society. But questions now arise: how many people can the earth sustain? How can we provide the physical and cultural needs, and handle the waste products, of billions of people without destroying the natural environment? Do people have a natural right to produce as many children as they wish? Such questions force a basic policy decision upon the nations of the world: Shall they rely on natural processes to curb, or technological advances to cope with, the rapid growth of population? Or shall it be a matter of public policy to control population growth? What forms of population control can be effective without destroying basic human and democratic rights and values?

4. The equally dramatic growth of human technology places additional burdens on the earth's carrying capacity. Environmental deterioration is

evident not only in overpopulated areas but also in areas of lesser population with a highly-developed technology. Modern technology has opened exciting new possibilities for the elimination of drudgery, the widening of man's capabilities and horizons, and for increased control over disease and hunger. But in affluent countries, each person places great material and energy demands on available resources. New agricultural and industrial technologies, in addition to promising new benefits, may also create forms of pollution and undesirable side-effects, which we cannot yet handle. This poses the questions: Shall new technologies be put into use before their probable effects on the environment are determined? To what extent can man continue to use the earth as a technological laboratory?

5. Our use of technology is determined by the basic values and goals we seek in our society. Technology can be used to husband the resources of the earth or to exploit them for material gain. Technological and economic development may be necessary for underdeveloped countries intent on raising substandard living conditions. But just as population growth can reach a point where it becomes a threat to national survival, so the continued economic growth and exploitation of resources by affluent countries raises serious questions about national priorities. How much material accumulation is necessary for the good life? At what points may it become necessary to slow economic growth? Upon whom should the burden of such a slowdown fall? Are we willing to set limits to our consumption of materials if the health of our total environment requires it? How can we recycle the waste materials of our present economy to reduce pollution and preserve resources?

6. Another contributor to the environmental crisis is the fragmentation of political and economic decision-making processes. The specialization of science and technology; the arbitrary geography of political units; the self-interest drives of political and economic units all contribute to making it difficult to establish and enforce policies that conserve the total human and natural environment. It is difficult to achieve the "ecological vision" of the whole web of life. Where will the tools be found to effect the vision? What new forms of political and economic decision making will be needed to create an "ecological" politics?

Problems of Cleaning Up the Environment

7. Answers to such central questions are needed if mankind genuinely seeks to restore the quality of the environment. The search for such answers will raise many questions about implementation. Some questions will require scientific and technical competence. But other policy questions require decisions by concerned citizens based on social considerations and value judgments:

a. Who decides what our national policy shall be? Do we need statements of overall environmental policy and priorities by our national and state governments? Should such goals be set by administrative agencies, citizens' commissions, legislative action, or constitutional amendments? What is the role of the federal government in

setting standards or in financing projects? What should be left to state and local governments? Are new forms of regional agencies such as watershed districts needed?

b. What are our priorities? Though choices are rarely clear-cut, we will have to indicate priorities on a host of difficult questions. For example: Will we insist on air and water pollution standards if they cost us some industrial development and jobs? Are we willing to set some controls on use of automobiles, which are a major source of air pollution? What controls do we want on use of pesticides and herbicides which may increase agricultural production to feed and clothe growing populations? Shall some remaining wild areas be designated for wilderness preservation, recreational use, or multiple use? How much weight will we give to preserving natural beauty or wildlife if these are threatened by industrial or housing developments?

c. Who pays? Estimates vary widely, but all economists agree that cleaning up present forms of pollution will cost billions of dollars. The American citizen will ultimately bear the cost, either in higher taxes and prices for cleaning up pollution, or else in health costs and other "hidden social costs" of putting up with it. But how shall costs be distributed? Shall government subsidize pollution control projects directly, through tax breaks, or by collecting fines on pollutants? Or should it leave costs to individual polluters and those directly affected by their decisions?

d. What is the role of the individual citizen? The environmental crisis calls not only for public policy decisions, but for the reevaluation by every individual of his role as consumer of goods, services, and power, and as a molder of public opinion and values. What changes am I willing to make in my consumption of goods, my use of fuels, my disposal of waste and litter? How can I inform myself on the public issues involved, and on the principles of ecology which underlie them? Citizens' groups have often been in the forefront of the fight to preserve our environment. Which ones should I help? Or what new group may be needed in my community? Am I willing to use the channels of corporate power open to me to speak and act on my convictions? Most basic is the question: what values do I seek? Do I want to help promote a diversity of environments and possible life styles, or reduce the environment to a few patterns? Do I want to husband the resources of our land or use them up in an economy based on quick turnover and planned obsolescence?

The Concern of the Churches

8. Behind all the questions of political, economic, and scientific policies toward the environment lies a fundamental religious concern: What is man's relationship toward the world which he inhabits? Nature has often been seen as the enemy of man, to be fought and mastered. It has often been seen as an inexhaustible treasure to be plundered. But the very success of man in conquering and exploiting nature now threatens his own welfare

and survival. Christians have often participated in and justified the exploitation of nature. But a more careful understanding of Scriptures will lead us to a renewed care for the earth.

9. *As Christians we affirm God's creation.* God created all things and proclaimed each thing good, even before man was created. He proclaimed the whole of nature — including man — as “very good” (Genesis 1). Our response to the world God created is properly neither fear nor greed, but respect for and celebration of everything in it as the handiwork of God.

10. *As Christians we witness to Incarnation and Sacrament.* Even though man in his fall corrupted himself and subjected nature to bondage, God did not abandon His creation to futility (Romans 8). In Christ He entered our flesh in order to redeem all things; in the common elements of water, bread, and wine He covenants that redemption sacramentally with us. We dare not despise, misuse, or ignore what God created, redeemed, and inhabits, but thankfully live in hope of the redemption of all things.

11. *As Christians we are held responsible to an ethic of stewardship.* God's charge to man, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion . . .” (Genesis 1:28), seen in the light of Christian stewardship, is not a charter for human pride and exploitation of nature, but a mandate to be representatives of God in caring for the earth, as He cares for it. In Christ we have the freedom and responsibility to live in ways that reflect that care. Christian stewardship will be reflected, not only in individual styles of life, but in communal concern, as the Body of Christ, for the health and welfare of the total environment that we share with all living things.

12. As a church body we must teach and practice these truths as they relate to maintaining and restoring the quality of our environment. We urge that the entire American Lutheran Church make an intensive study for the next two years of the issues raised by the environmental crisis. The programs of the divisions, commissions, and auxiliaries of the national offices, and the activities of the districts and conferences, should reflect this concern. Congregations should provide opportunities for study and service which help equip their members to act responsibly on the issues involved. Members should especially be encouraged to fulfill their vocational roles in their homes and in their occupations in ways that enhance rather than damage the environment. In its own economic practices each unit of the corporate church needs to be mindful of its responsibilities for the care of the earth. Not only in its word but also in its deeds the whole of Christ's Church should be in the forefront of those who care and act in the environmental crisis.

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