

# Becoming Better Gardeners

BY TERESA MORGAN

Not only must Christians engage in careful theological reflection on the Christian theology of creation, we must act on our responsibilities. Many denominational and parachurch organizations, like the six mentioned here, can help us to become better “gardeners,” wise and committed environmental stewards who keep and serve God’s creation.

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**T**he Church is rediscovering a Christian ecological theology that affirms the beauty and goodness of creation and the human role to serve and keep God’s garden.<sup>1</sup> This ecological theology recognizes that care for the environment is an intrinsically religious issue because all of the earth’s community is valuable to God, who creates, sustains and redeems the whole. It promotes social justice and the common good, yet it is rooted firmly in the Bible and traditions of the Church. It grows in the rich soil of Scripture, wherein God delights in all creation (Genesis 1:9, 31), covenants with human beings and all other living creatures (Genesis 9:9-10), and redeems all creation (Romans 8: 22-23). This theology of creation has ethical implications for us. We are called to increase our appreciation for God’s presence in creation and recognize the interdependent relationships between humanity and nature. Aware that our use of global natural resources is unsustainable, we must adapt to the limitations of the creation. We must promote just and compassionate interventions to assist human communities, ecosystems, and the global commons that are in ecological crisis.

## THEOLOGICAL SPADEWORK

Among the first to draw attention to the deep religious implications of

environmental restoration was the Catholic community. Pope John Paul II wrote in his World Day of Peace (1990) address:

Men and women without any particular religious conviction, but with an acute sense of their responsibility for the common good, recognize their obligation to contribute to the restoration of a healthy environment. All the more should men and women who believe in God the Creator, and who are thus convinced that there is a well-defined unity and order in the world, feel called to address the problem.<sup>2</sup>

The religious aspect of creation's degradation is best defined as a moral obligation for the Church to intervene on its behalf. How should we approach the issues in light of the affirmations of our faith? What kind of interventions can the people of God accomplish in these highly complex, interrelated, and seemingly insolvable problems? Clearly the Genesis narratives charge us to serve and keep the garden that God created, because we reflect the divine image and can nurture the creation's life-giving processes. Though the biblical imperative to keep and serve creation is human-centered (Genesis 2:15), Genesis also requires humility and justice toward non-human creation. To act upon its moral responsibility in keeping creation, therefore, the Church must respond in ways that preserve the integrity of the whole.

The theological spadework that clarifies, develops, and announces this biblical imperative to care for the environment is an important first step as the Church responds to ecological degradation. Through this careful thinking we proclaim God's healing and redemptive presence in creation. Religious teachings shape societal attitudes; they provide an ethical interpretive framework, or worldview, for the way in which people live and relate to God and nature. Lynn White observed, "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion."<sup>3</sup> In the current ecological crisis our theology can link our spirituality to social activism in correcting the economic abuses and political injustice that often cause the environmental problems. The good news is that Christian denominations and institutions by the early 1990's had initiated broad efforts in education, advocacy, and focal service projects for environmental care. World conferences, scholarly publications, educational materials, denominational events, and powerful public exhortation began to enlarge their religious vision of creation. As a result, major initiatives were launched to protect the global commons and advance the cause of human justice.

As we develop the Christian ethical interpretive framework we discover significant concepts in the New Testament writings that can enrich

our understanding of stewardship and social justice. Three ideas discussed here are the household of God, the role of deacon, and the incarnation.

For example, the biblical imperative to keep and serve the creation must be linked to long-term sustainability of the whole, including land, water, animal species, and ecosystems. Sustainability is a norm that keeps the future in view; it says that meeting current needs cannot compromise the ability of future generations of creatures to meet their own needs.<sup>4</sup> We may put this meeting of the present and future needs of people and ecosystems into Christian terms by thinking about the earth's community as the household of God, the *oikos*. This way of thinking also highlights the interconnectedness among human beings, other creatures, and the non-living creation. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA's *Hope for a*

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The Christian theology of creation grows in the rich soil of Scripture. The New Testament ideas of the household of God, the role of deacon, and the incarnation, richly shape the biblical imperative to care for the environment.

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*Global Future: Toward Just and Sustainable Human Development* (1996) is an important policy statement that links justice and sustainability in the context of *oikos*. It says, "Sustainable development is now the most widely recommended remedy for the global social, economic, and ecological crisis." Sustainability is a necessity within the *oikos* because it integrates the economic, social, political, cultural, and ecological dimensions of the global community's future. In this way the fullest realization of human potential can occur that "centers attention on the critical role of justice."<sup>5</sup>

If Christians lag behind in caring for the environment, Susan Power Bratton challenges them to realize that they might be "deacons" to the creation. "Christianity has hardly shown consistent or courageous leadership in confronting demographic dilemmas or environmental degradation," Bratton complains. "Although a handful of socially conscious Christians have exhorted their denominations and congregations to greater environmental responsibility, Christianity thus far has been barely a follower, much less a leader, in engaging international environmental concerns."<sup>6</sup> Let us confess that sometimes, believing incorrectly that the earth is so vast and nature is so powerful as to be beyond meaningful intervention, we do not make even modest efforts to address these concerns. One remedy that Bratton advocates is to be "environmental deacons" in our congregations and local communities. Environmental deacons live everyday in creation's service, addressing the unjust distribution of economic benefits and risks,

leading the way in poor neighborhoods next to leaking dumps, and encouraging the victims of toxic exposure.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, theologian Leonardo Boff recommends that reflecting upon the incarnation should deepen our commitment to care for God's creation. Of course, he notes, "The entire universe was created by God ... [and we] observe the signs of God's hand in everything: in all created things and in the spiritual and physical reality of humankind." However, he emphasizes, "The Christian scriptures extend and radicalize the same line of experience of God in history. It testifies that God whole and entire has entered into human reality and has taken human form in Jesus of Nazareth."<sup>8</sup>

We must recover and proclaim the biblical imperative to serve creation. This includes interpreting the biblical witness to a postmodern world, deepening theological reflection, and re-envisioning the church's mission to include striving for environmental justice.

#### ACTING ON OUR RESPONSIBILITIES

Not only must we engage in this careful theological reflection, we must act on our responsibilities, which include:

- ♦ Encouraging appropriate technologies such as reuse, recycling, and renewable energy;
- ♦ Fostering local conservation and sustainable growth strategies;
- ♦ Educating about environmental degradation and its impact on human health and wellness;
- ♦ Seeking fair distributions of economic benefits and risks produced by our ecological problems, in regard to wealthy and poor, urban and rural populations;
- ♦ Forging local connections among churches in different denominations and with other groups in order to address common problems;
- ♦ Developing an ethic for the church that combines with integrity our concern for the creation and for the gospel.

Many denominational and parachurch organizations can help congregations and us to become involved in environmental stewardship. Here are six examples.

Earth Ministry's "Greening Congregations" is an impressive model for any congregation or community wanting to participate in ecological education and awareness. Earth Ministry promotes creation stewardship with *Earth Letter*, a thoughtful newsletter on current environmental issues. It highlights local, national, and international struggles of indigenous groups to achieve environmental sustainability. Go to [www.earthministry.org](http://www.earthministry.org) for a closer look.

"Transforming faith-based communities for a sustainable world" is the

mission of the Web of Creation site maintained by the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. It provides prayers and worship materials, biblically based lessons and study programs, and practical ideas for individuals' and congregations' energy stewardship. Web of Creation has educational resources for environmental health and wellness. See [www.webofcreation.org](http://www.webofcreation.org).

The Christian Environmental Association (CEA) promotes biblical stewardship by focusing on environmental justice, which is the relationship

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between the health of the environment and the health and well-being of the poor and marginalized. Through the CEA's one-week team programs and eight-week internships, believers may serve Christ by serving the poor in circumstances of ecological blight. Colleges as well as churches can participate in many research and mission opportunities.

Explore the CEA at [www.targetearth.org/index.html](http://www.targetearth.org/index.html).

The Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission developed the Christian Environmental Network, [www.christianenvironmentalnetwork.com](http://www.christianenvironmentalnetwork.com). It offers "The Call of Creation," twelve Bible study lessons (six for adults, three for youth, and three for children) on topics related to the creation and human dominion, over-consumption, loss of biodiversity, and ecological stewardship. The Web site also reviews current activity in the Texas legislature related to environment ethics, including issues of water, solid waste, nuclear pollution, and agriculture. With many links to other organizations, faith-based and secular, this site is a great starting place for searching the World Wide Web for environmental education resources for churches.

The National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE) was established in 1993 by four major religious communities: the U. S. Catholic Conference, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, the National Council of Churches, and the Evangelical Environmental Network. These partner organizations maintain their unique faith perspective as they cooperate to "weave care for God's creation throughout religious life in such a way as to protect the natural world and human well-being within it."<sup>9</sup> The NRPE's objective is to move churches and synagogues from "pollution to solution" through positive local, regional, and national efforts in environmental sustainability. The NRPE Web site, [www.nrpe.org](http://www.nrpe.org), provides an overview of the history, goals and objectives of the movement.

The Forum on Religion and Ecology, Harvard University Center for

the Environment, is an excellent resource for environmental ethics, science, public policy, and economics. The Forum is developing a Web site, [www.environment.harvard.edu/religion](http://www.environment.harvard.edu/religion), with information on environmental ethics in the world religions and relevant passages from their sacred texts. Teachers will find syllabi and reading lists for innovative courses on religion and ecology.

These are just a few of the organizations that can help our congregations and us to become better “gardeners,” wise and committed environmental stewards who care for the creation.

## NOTES

1 See, for instance, the articles in Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds., *Christianity and Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 2000).

2 Pope John Paul II, “World Day of Peace Address” (January 1, 1990: Vatican City). Reprinted in *And God Saw That it Was Good*, ed. Drew Christianson, SJ, (Washington, DC: U. S. Catholic Conference, 1996), 215.

3 Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155 (March 1967), 1204.

4 *Our Common Future, The World Commission on Environment and Development*. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press), 1987.

5 *Hope for A Global Future: Toward Just and Sustainable Human Development* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church USA, 1989), 75.

6 Susan Power Bratton, “Response to Daniel Maguire: The Church Should Call not Just Prophets but Environmental Deacons,” in *Christianity and Ecology*, ed. Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Ruther Radford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 429.

7 *Ibid.*, 432-433.

8 Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 150.

9 “Mission.” *National Religious Partnership for the Environment*. Online. World Wide Web. Available: <http://www.nrpe.org/mission.html>.



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