

Comprehensiveness and the Middle Way: Anglican Perspectives on Religion and Ecology

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Ecological Society of America Annual Meeting, Baltimore, MD
12 August 2015

I started life as an oceanographer, studying cephalopods in the northeastern Pacific. I worked on systematics, zoogeography, fisheries problems, and some evolutionary theorizing. Oceanographers think in systems, much like ecologists. We're trained to understand that none of what we study can be isolated from the rest of the environment. When research funding plummeted and the job market fell apart 30 years ago, I began to think about bigger systems, and that's a short version of why I'm here today.

I serve a body of two million Episcopalians in 17 countries,¹ who are part of a larger body of 80 million Anglican Christians across the globe. At our best, we're trying to find ways to live in healthy relationship with all our neighbors, human and not. We represent a tradition that understands the natural world as a gift that can't be owned by anyone but is meant to be cared for so that all might flourish. We think that's the deep meaning of the Hebrew word, "shalom," and what Jesus meant by "abundant life." It's an image of a world that lives in peace because there is justice, i.e., relationships of all sorts are "right" or life-giving. It's a vision of a healthy planetary ecosystem.

Anglicans and Episcopalians have always insisted that right relationship with God means taking context seriously. It's taken various forms over the centuries, from insisting that worship happen in languages that people understand, to changing our minds about things like divorce and same-sex marriage when we learn more about how to promote healthy lives for all. A number of congregations have begun to celebrate a season of creation, focusing their worship and teaching around the gifts of the natural world and our care of them.²

There's a long history of eminent Anglican scientists – Charles Darwin, Isaac Newton, Margaret Mead, John Polkinghorne³ – people who have treasured the world around them and been intensely curious about its complexities. For many, curiosity about the world is a reflection of a desire to understand what right relationship looks like – and it is an obvious and underutilized avenue for building bridges with others who care about the larger planetary ecosystem.

My task is to offer some examples of how we might build more of those bridges between the scientific community and people of faith. These examples come both from within The Episcopal Church and from sister churches in the broader Anglican Communion.⁴

Let's start with the essentials of life: food, water, fuel, shelter, health. One of the centerpieces of Christian life has to do with a sacred meal.⁵ It's meant to feed us so that we

¹ <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/about-us>

² <http://seasonofcreation.com/>

³ And Francis Bacon, James Clerk Maxwell, Lord Kelvin, Robert Boyle, William Harvey, Joseph Thomson, George Berkeley...

⁴ The Anglican Communion is the third largest distribution system in the world, behind the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox, serving human beings globally, often beyond the end of the road

⁵ Various called Holy Communion, Eucharist, the Mass, it echoes the last meal Jesus ate with his intimate community, in which he charged them to continue to gather communities in celebration of shared abundance

ensure the whole world is fed. One of the most common acts of congregations toward neighbors is to share food – in soup kitchens, community meals, or through pantries that offer staples to the hungry. An increasing number of churches are gardening as well, or providing ways in which the produce of the land is more available to people living in food deserts. Several years ago a bishop who didn't want me to visit for "holier" events did let me in to bless a church's new community garden. I don't think he recognized the subversive nature of actually feeding the hungry. Gardening is a very local way for congregations to begin to ask the hard questions about how land is used, what's actually in the food we eat, and to teach children and urbanites about where food comes from, and how human beings, communities, and the earth can be healthier through our relationships with food. A growing number of camps and conference centers are growing some of the food they serve, initiating organic and sustainable farming operations, and offering outdoor school opportunities for children to learn about the natural environment. Learning about the connections between land, food, environment, health, and justice is intrinsic to healthier and holier communities.⁶

Episcopalians and our partners also do development work in other nations and parts of the US where poverty is endemic.⁷ That work may include reforestation, water source development, sanitation, sustainable modes of food production, and shifting from environmentally hazardous fuels to solar ovens, smokeless stoves, and biogas. In the northern Philippines, we're working with farmers to recover and improve traditional farming methods and decrease reliance on commercial seeds, fertilizers, and insecticides. In Ghana, a microfinance project supports women farmers by supplying donkeys, small plows, and carts they can use to produce food on small plots and market the excess. Community re-development has helped to transform a neglected section of Dallas through gardens, nutrition classes, and health initiatives.⁸ Aquaponics projects are underway to supply fresh vegetables and fish in the Navajo nation⁹ and for disabled children in Port-au-Prince.¹⁰ Those projects will feed local populations and provide job training, employment, and income. A tree-planting initiative in the West Bank teaches fellow Muslim and Christian students about water and soil conservation, as well as peace-building.¹¹ All of these are systemic responses to poverty and environmental sustainability.

Many of you are probably familiar with Interfaith Power and Light.¹² It began as Episcopal Power and Light, launched by an Episcopal priest in San Francisco. Sally Bingham has built networks and relationships with a remarkable diversity of faith and community partners. Advocacy and public engagement is a central core of how we're working to heal broken and life-denying systems.¹³ As part of a global network, we seek to educate communities, nations, and legislators about sea-level rise in the Pacific, its impact on island and coastal populations, and increase awareness about the effects of climate change on the poorest and most vulnerable.¹⁴

⁶ Healthy, whole, and holy share the same etymological root, and all have to do with the theological idea of salvation

⁷ Through Episcopal Relief & Development (www.episcopalrelief.org) and its partners, as well as through more local partnerships

⁸ <http://jubileecenter.org/>

⁹ <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2014/03/06/new-website-offers-ways-to-assist-navajoland/>

¹⁰ <http://wtnhaitipartnership.blogspot.com/2015/04/team-in-haiti-building-aquaponics.html>

¹¹ http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/79425_95833_ENG_HTML.htm; <http://www.j-diocese.org/index.php?lang=en&page=news&item=1348660401489>

¹² <http://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org/about/mission-history/>

¹³ <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/climate-change-crisis>

¹⁴ <http://anglicanink.com/article/anglican-communion-environmental-network-communicue>

That has been key to engaging faith traditions and congregations who have often been more inwardly focused.

Local action raises awareness about global impact, and the work of Cool Congregations has shown faith communities and their households how to reduce their impact on the global airshed and planetary warming.¹⁵ We and our partners in the Anglican Communion are scrutinizing our investment portfolios, seeking to leverage them for changes in the global corporate ecosystem and movement toward long-term sustainability.¹⁶ We are, after all, in the business of eternity, and pray continually that we might receive bread today and forever!

We've partnered with the Church of Sweden and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to raise awareness of the environmental crisis among our own members and the wider public as part of our advocacy work.¹⁷ Our regular advocacy work in Washington is done in partnership with the ELCA and often with other major Christian and interreligious bodies.

Let me offer one long-term and very particular example. The Gwich'in tribe of northern Alaska and northwest Canada are largely Episcopalian, as are many of the indigenous people of Alaska. Their subsistence culture depends on caribou, which migrate across what is now the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Our concern and advocacy over the years were a significant part of the Refuge's establishment, expansion, and persistence in the face of cries for oil exploration and development. That work never seems to end, but thus far we've largely been successful.¹⁸

The connections between the physical and biotic environment and human flourishing are of immense concern to many faith traditions. The present-world focus of Episcopalians and others means that we address climate change and environmental sustainability as deeply spiritual issues. We are willing and eager to partner with any who share those concerns. The publication of *Laudato Si'* has been a global gift which we celebrate, for it not only raises the awareness of over a billion Roman Catholics, it has demanded the attention of countless others. Francis, like his namesake in Assisi, has challenged the world to be concerned about the poorest among us. We can expand that to include all the unheard and voiceless poor – including this fragile earth, our island home, which has no one but us to cry out on its behalf.

While Francis is here in September, a group of national religious leaders will gather to raise these issues at the Washington National Cathedral (both an Episcopal cathedral and a house of prayer for all people of this nation).¹⁹ *Religions for Peace* (of which we are a part) is mounting a global interreligious campaign focused on climate change.²⁰ Together with IPL, The Episcopal Church is engaged in a grassroots effort to raise awareness, educate, and motivate action leading up to the Council of Partners in Paris. That work will continue. In early 2016 we're fostering an exchange of young adults between Latin America and the US to develop trans-national advocacy partnerships. We're also working to support communities dependent on extractive fossil fuel industries in finding long-term alternative and sustainable employment.

¹⁵ <http://www.coolcongregations.org/>

¹⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/03/episcopal-church-fossil-fuel-divestment>

¹⁷ <http://www.livingchurch.org/united-climate-change>

¹⁸ <http://ourarcticrefuge.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/GSChumanrightsreport.pdf> ;

<http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2015/04/20/episcopalians-urged-to-act-to-protect-the-arctic-national-wildlife-refuge/>; <http://www.thewitness.org/archive/janfeb2001/gwichen.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/brianmclaren/2015/08/coming-together-in-faith-on-climate-a-multi-faith-response-to-the-popes-historic-visit-to-congress/>

²⁰ <http://www.rfpusa.org/>

Scientists can offer clarity and detail about what's happening now, and projections about how this planetary ecosystem is likely to change. People of faith can offer hope for change in the minds, hearts, and actions of many who are concerned about the poor and vulnerable. Together, we can shift the dialogue, and the trajectory.

There are abundant bridges to be built if we seek the full flourishing of this island home. We're ready – and looking for partners.²¹

²¹ <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/eco-justice>