



Pennsylvania Council of Churches

Environment

Policy Positions

Because we believe all people have a God-given responsibility to be stewards of the environment, the Council affirms the following principles:

- That policymakers weigh the impact of economic progress on natural resources. This includes use of raw material resources that are scarce and/or finite, as well as preservation of forests, wildlife habitats, waterways, and other environmentally sensitive, vulnerable, and irreplaceable natural assets.
- That policymakers give priority to considering options that promote energy efficiency, wiser use of natural resources, development and use of renewable and alternative energy sources, and that set appropriate controls for pollution emissions from vehicles, machinery, and businesses.
- That all persons engage in a simplified lifestyle—living, to the extent possible, in harmony with nature.
- That all persons engage in activities that avoid over-consumption and waste.

In light of these principles, the Council supports legislation, regulations, government policies, and corporate practices that promote sustainability by:

- Controlling and/or reducing air, water, land, noise, and thermal pollution.
- Reducing waste, promoting energy efficiency, promoting use of renewable resources, supporting use of environmentally safe or less hazardous inputs over products and processes that generate hazardous waste, and promoting responsible management of hazardous and non-hazardous wastes.
- Ensuring safe operation of nuclear power facilities and the safe disposal of nuclear waste.
- Protecting and preserving environmentally sensitive areas, and farmland, and preventing sprawl or uncontrolled growth.
- Educating citizens to engage in environmentally sound practices that include, but are not limited to: recycling and composting; safe use and disposal of toxic materials; waste reduction; wise purchasing habits that includes buying products with minimal packaging, environmentally friendly or less toxic products where possible, durable versus disposable goods, recyclable versus non-recyclable goods, products made from recycled materials, and purchase of only what is needed; purchase of energy efficient vehicles and appliances, and use of mass transit, carpooling, and planning trips so as to minimize fuel consumption.

Background

A report¹ on health and the environment worldwide by the World Resources Institute, UNEP, the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank offers some sobering findings:

In the poorest regions of the world an estimated one in five children will not live to see their fifth birthday, primarily because of environment-related diseases—a tragedy that translates into 11 million childhood deaths a year, despite vast improvements in human health globally over the past decades that mean millions of people are living longer, healthier lives than ever before.

**“The earth is the Lord’s and
all that is in it, the world,
and those who live in it...”**

Psalm 24:1 (NRSV)

While the most devastating impacts of environmental degradation occur in the developing world, environmental threats to health in the industrialized nations are also of concern. In the wealthier countries these stem both from industrial pollution and biological sources. For example, more than 100 million people in Europe and North America are still exposed to unsafe air with some air pollutants proving more difficult to control than expected; asthma is rising dramatically and environmental factors appear to be at least partly to blame; and the excessive use of fertilizers is disrupting coastal ecosystems, with harmful algal blooms and fish deaths. Increasing international travel and trade is

¹ *World Resources 1998-99, edited by Leslie Roberts and published by Oxford University Press.*

providing new opportunities for the spread of “new” infectious diseases including Lyme disease and rare hemorrhagic fevers such as Ebola, while other previously controlled diseases have returned with a vengeance.

Jesus instructed us to “love our neighbor as ourselves.” Harm to the earth brings harm to people, and we are responsible for each other’s well being.

From “It’s God’s World: Christians, Care for Creation and Global Warming”

The report goes on to say, “Because many of the environmental conditions that impact health are avoidable, prevention of health problems through environmental management, rather than simply treating diseases and ailments after they have occurred, is the salient message of the environment and health section of *World Resources 1998-99*.”

Global warming may be the greatest threat, because it will harm people all around the world, especially the world’s poor. In Pennsylvania alone, economic losses due to extreme weather events believed to be caused by climate change are over \$364 million². Rising temperatures threaten jobs and tourism dollars. The quality of life is compromised when the Commonwealth’s magnificent streams and forests decline because of global warming, and warmer temperatures may cause the increase of Lyme Disease and the West Nile virus as more insects that carry these diseases survive through warmer winters. Children and the elderly are the most vulnerable.

Theological Perspective and the View of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches

According to “Human Creatures as Part of the Whole Creation³,” humans are:

...frail creatures in a world of precarious balance ordained and sustained by the Creator. According to the biblical witness, God’s creation is both reliable and fragile. “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease” (Gen. 8:22) But God’s creation is reliable only for the reason that God guarantees its order. Everything on earth owes its life to God and depends on God’s faithfulness. “These all look to you to give them their food in due season...When you...take away their breath, they die and return to their dust” (Psalm 104:27-29).

As human beings, we have to respect [God’s] order if we are to live on earth. When the limits set by God are transgressed, the fragile balance can easily be broken...Humans are creatures whose life flourishes only as they respect their connection with the whole. Eating and even breathing remind us of our dependence on the cycles of nature...With our unique freedom, however, we tend to forget or deny our continuing dependence on the rest of creation. The patterns of behavior and industry that we establish for ourselves are often at odds with the ecological cycles into which they need to fit.

The Council’s *Principles for Public Advocacy* (draft, 3/05) says:

We believe creation belongs to God, and that we are called to act as stewards of creation on God’s behalf...We envision a Commonwealth that honors the integrity of God’s good creation and acknowledges our dependence upon and solidarity with creation...We support government decisions related to the land and the environment that eliminate racial, sexual, economic, or any other discrimination that occurs when people have little or no voice in decisions affecting them.

...we hold up the principle of sustainability, which suggests priorities that may include, but not be limited to: protection of species and their habitats; preservation of clean land, air and water; reduction of wastes; care of the land; and greater responsibility in the use of energy.

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

Genesis 1:31a (NRSV)

Dangerous outcomes result when short-term practices such as human population pressures, excessive consumption, and abuse of the global climate and the ozone layer continue unabated. Sustainability results when the quality of life for future generations is not compromised by current practices and when decisions affecting an immediate locale do not ignore the larger impact on the entire planet and its ecosystems.

We support economic growth achieved through implementing sustainable practices and not at the cost of environmental degradation.

² Cool Pennsylvania, a campaign led by Citizens for Pennsylvania’s Future with PA Trout, PennEnvironment and the Pennsylvania Interfaith Climate Change Campaign.

³ “Human Creatures as Part of the Whole of Creation,” *Sign of Peril, Test of Faith: Accelerated Climate Change*, World Council of Churches, 1993, p. 32.