



eco- congregation

an environmental toolkit for churches

Module 3

creation and christianity

Some green theological perspectives

*Eco-congregation Canada is a project of
A Rocha Canada – Christians in Conservation
512 172 Street, Surrey, B.C., V3S 9R3 Registered Charity # 86663 8943 RR0001*

Module 3 – **creation and christianity**

Contents

Caring for creation – a key Christian task

- The Creation and Christianity Module 2
- Quotes 2

In the beginning the Word was green: faith perspectives rooted in the creation stories

- Doctrine of Creation 3
- God saw that it was good – a refrain for our time 3
- Subdue and have dominion – Christian perspectives 4
- Till and care – the basis of a relationship with nature 5
- Sabbath – a time of rest and celebration 5
- Fall – the disobedience of humanity 5

The Biblical journey to a new heaven and new earth

- Sin - being separated from God's purpose 6
- Creation - God's first Cathedral 6
- God and time 7
- The Earth is the Lord's 7
- Holistic vision 7
- God's promise of salvation for the whole of creation 8
- Incarnation – a religion where matter really matters 9
- The 'end' of creation... a transformed order 9

Mission and the environment - Caring for Creation as an exercise in Christian discipleship and witness 11

Models of caring for creation

- Stewardship 12
- Co-creator 12
- Priesthood 13
- Companion with God 13
- Covenant – God's agreement, human response 14
- Co-created as part of the whole created order 14
- Belonging to God 14

Selected References for further reading 15

About Eco-Congregation 16

Caring for creation – a key Christian task

Christian concern for the environment has become increasingly important in recent years. In part this is a response to the realisation of the detrimental impact that human activity is having on the environment, in part, because of the growing interest in green or eco-theology.

Both the Bible and Christian tradition have some vital and profound insights into care of what the world terms the 'environment' but which the Church understands as God's creation. Approaching environmental issues through Christian 'lenses' offers valuable ethical and spiritual dimensions that may contribute to environmental work both within and outside the church. It is also an approach filled with hope. So often, environmental issues are dealt with against a background of fear and threat. We should stop doing activity 'x' because otherwise environmental problem 'y' will happen. Without minimising the gravity, scale or urgency of environmental issues, the starting point for caring for the Earth for Christians is as a proper response to a loving, creating God. Caring for creation is a key Christian task.

Exploring 'green Christianity' can be a positive, enjoyable and fulfilling part of Christian discipleship. As with all theology, Christian care for the environment needs to be rooted in a consideration of the Biblical heritage. This Module introduces some of the ideas in the developing area of eco-theology. The ideas are intended to form a foundation on which local churches can base their work to care for God's creation.

The **Creation and Christianity** Module

This Module aims to reflect some of the variety of theological ideas and perspectives that have been expressed, rather than provide a neat theological model of creation. It has also sought to ensure that, whilst attention has been paid to key texts in Genesis, it is consistent with images and stories from other parts of the Bible. Further green theological thoughts may be found in Module 6 'Exploring God's green word', which comprises two sets of Bible studies and an address.

Quotes

'All creation is a song of praise to God' Hildegard of Bingen

'There will be no new Noah's Ark to save some and leave the rest to perish. We all either sink or swim together...' Leonardo Boff

See also **Module 6 "Exploring God's Green Word"** which contains an address and two sets of Bible Studies on the theme of caring for God's creation.

In the beginning the Word was green...

- faith perspectives rooted in the creation stories

The first two chapters of Genesis record two different creation stories, both of which have roots in ancient myths. The first is the story of creation in six days, culminating with the Sabbath as a day of rest and celebration. This story was written to declare that everything is dependent for its existence and meaning upon the sovereign God, rather than as an ordered or scientific account of the origins of the cosmos. The crowning part of the story is the creation of humanity, with the expression 'made in the image' reflecting the privilege and responsibility given to humanity of overseeing God's rule on earth.

The second story, sometimes known as the 'garden' story, tells of the forming first of man and then of woman in the Garden of Eden and includes the story of the 'fall'. This story comes from a different tradition to the first story. It was concerned with providing answers to some fundamental questions facing the faith community of Israel, including the refusal of humans to acknowledge the sovereignty of God and the consequence of this action. This second creation story moves from a pre-historical state of harmony in creation to the fall, symbolised by an act of environmental disobedience.

These creation stories may be viewed as a set of pictures that portray the relationship between God, humanity and the rest of the created order. Whilst they were written against the background of particular economic, social and political circumstances, they contain some insights which transcend time and circumstances.

- Both creation stories in Genesis helped to shape the **Doctrine of Creation**, in which it is held that the world and all that it contains comes from the free creative actions of a loving God. This may be interpreted in different ways. What is widely agreed is that God's involvement in creation is about producing something out of nothing. For some, this 'something' is the bricks and mortar of the planet, for others, that God created the potential for the development of the cosmos.
- The first story of creation is presented in a form that suggests an association with an act of worship. Whilst the origins of the account may have been passed down orally through generations, this narrative reads as if it is carefully crafted material used in worship. The story reveals that on successive days God created yet more wonders and at the end of most days there is a refrain, that '**God saw that it was good**' or 'God saw that it was very good'. It is possible to imagine a priest reading the story in worship and the congregation responding with the refrain.

The refrain in Genesis reminds us that the whole of creation has value in God's eyes. Whilst it is indeed a matter of human self-interest to care for the planet, there is a danger that the planet is viewed solely from a human perspective. For example, humanity might stop clearing tropical forests because they might contain a plant with cancer-curing properties. This is a

'what is in it for us' or anthropocentric attitude. The refrain reminds worshippers that God values the whole of the created order, from aardvark to zebra, from shrimp to blue whale, from ragged robin to the giant redwood, the land, the sea and the air. Caring for the whole of creation demonstrates our love of God; destroying creation is akin to spitting on the cross-bound face of Christ.

- In the first story of creation, humanity is given a distinctive place and a particular responsibility within the created order. The words used in Genesis are to **'subdue'** and **'have dominion'**. These words have a rich heritage within the Judaic-Christian tradition but, over the years, have sometimes been understood in less positive ways. For example, in an influential article published in the journal *Science* in 1967, Lynn White, citing the command to subdue and have dominion, laid the blame for many environmental ills on the Judaic-Christian heritage. Whilst there are elements of truth within his thesis, the article has been criticised because it does not adequately account for environmental destruction in times and places not touched by the Judaic/Christian tradition and, in part, because of a flawed interpretation of the text.

So what does **'to subdue'** and **'have dominion'** mean?

The command within the Genesis story 'to subdue' the earth is a translation of the Hebrew word *kabash*. The word is used, with reference to land, elsewhere in the Old Testament within the context of conquering the Promised Land, which indicates a strong use of the word. To place this in context, it is necessary to consider the difference between the life of the people of Israel two thousand years before Christ and, indeed, in the time of Christ, and typical life in the 21st century in the west. In Biblical times, life was more precarious. Many people lived 'on the edge' of existence, their lives overshadowed by a variety of threats including earthquake, wind and fire, famine and drought and from animals marauding their homesteads, flocks and crops. Given this context, 'to subdue' can be understood to be concerned with bringing order and well-being rather than wreaking destruction. Indeed, it was Jesus who revealed his mastery of creation by calming the storm so that life and order might continue.

The word 'dominion', which is a translation of the Hebrew word *radah*, is used in Genesis with reference to a relationship with regard to other living creatures: fish, birds, cattle and creeping things. To have dominion is sometimes understood in a secular context as meaning to do what you like, which may include autocratic or despotic models of management, but its use within the Old Testament has a different understanding. Old Testament kings were called to exercise their reign with due regard to the well-being of their subjects, other creatures and the land. The intention of the command 'to have dominion', is to call those made in the image of God to rule in a way that reflects the teaching given by God.

- The garden story of creation gives another perspective on the relationship that humanity is called to have with nature. The story opens with a garden into

which the man, Adam, having been formed from the dust and given breath, was placed. The man was then commanded to **till and care for** the soil. The story reminds us that we are a part of nature but with a particular responsibility for it. We have the privilege of sharing God's garden, but responsibilities in our use of it. In the garden story there is a sense of God calling us to tend and care, till and cultivate a living, loving relationship with the earth from which we came, and to which we will return.

The story also marks the symbolic start of a dynamic journey for God's people from the Garden of Eden to the City of Gold (Rev 21:18). A journey in which God's people, travelling through time and against a variety of economic, social and political circumstances, are called to transform individual and community life in response to the revelation of God's purpose. The true 'end' of creation being the Kingdom of God on earth, rather than a return to some virgin Eden.

- **Sabbath** – a time of rest and celebration. The first account in Genesis tells of six days of creative activity followed by a seventh day when God rested and all of creation sang God's praise. The story points to the need to set aside production and consumption for a period and to reflect, give thanks and worship. Observing the Sabbath reminds the Church and the world that life has a spiritual dimension as well as a material one. By observing the Sabbath, worshippers are encouraged to view life as a means to God's purpose and God's end, rather than the earth as a means to an end in life.

- **Fall** – the disobedience of humanity. The story of the fall is related in Genesis 3 which first tells of the life of bliss in the garden and the intimate delight in the relationship between God and Adam and Eve. The story then records the desire of humanity to become 'like gods' and is made explicit in the taking of the fruit from the forbidden tree. The punishment given was their expulsion from paradise and their condemnation to a life involving suffering. It is notable that the fall is symbolised by an act of environmental disobedience. In speaking of a lost paradise, the story has a mythical quality, but it has been used through the years to explain the problems of evil and suffering in the world through the separation from God and it is a powerful sign of the yearning that humanity has for a better world.

The following section deals with the relationship between God, humanity and the rest of creation since the fall. The Biblical account consistently reveals the love of God and the striving and struggling of humanity to participate in the transformation of a scarred creation into a new heaven and a new earth.

The Biblical journey to a new heaven and new earth

Sin - **the sense of being separated from God's purpose.**

Humanity's disobedience to the will of God is revealed throughout the Bible. In many instances this has the consequence of bringing sadness to God and separation of humanity from God's purpose. For some, the suffering caused by human sin is understood to be part of the judgement of God, for others it is that humanity is separating itself from the purpose of God. The flood in the time of Noah may be understood to be both an act of judgement and an act of salvation and the rainbow covenant which follows is a promise from God made to Noah and all living creatures never to destroy the earth by a flood again. However, as with all covenants or agreements, there is an assumption that the other party has a part to play too. In this respect humanity has moral responsibilities which include an ecological dimension. Failure to exercise the command to till and care for the earth, given in Genesis 2, and worse, to scar creation through human activity, may be understood as a sin and an act of betrayal of the promises and love of God. Despite the sinfulness of humanity, the Biblical account and experiences from the past through to today reveal God's grace and continuing call away from sin and to the purpose of ushering in a new heaven and a new earth.

Creation - **God's first Cathedral**

Those who have ever paused in a beautiful setting such as a mountain top or quiet river valley may understand the expression that creation was God's first evangelist. Sometimes in such inspiring places people can have a spiritual experience of feeling close to God.

There is a sense in which creation may be viewed as **God's first Cathedral**, a place where God can be found and worshipped. In Psalm 19 these thoughts are found in the opening verses:

*The heavens tell out the glory of God,
Heaven's vault makes known his handiwork.
One day speaks to another,
Night to night imparts knowledge,
And this without speech or language
Or sound of any voice.*

Psalm 19: 1-3

As evangelists of God's good news we should care for God's Cathedral of Creation, for to despoil it is akin to placing a barrier between people and their awareness of God's presence.

God and time

The Bible is full of stories of people who look back at past events in their lives, the lives of others or the life of their nation, and sense God's presence. God is an eternal God who was, and is, and ever shall be. God loves those in the past, those present now and those still to come. Looking back and finding God's presence in the past can help people to sense God's presence in the present and give an assurance that God will be with them in the future.

The dimension of 'all time' through which God exercises care reminds us to care as God's stewards for the benefit of those alive now and also for those who will be born in the future. It is a time perspective that can make a positive contribution to the wider environmental debate.

The Earth is the Lord's

Much of the Old Testament contains stories of the relationship between God, the people of Israel and land. Psalm 24 opens with a direct attribution that:

*To the Lord belong the earth and everything in it,
the world and all its inhabitants.
For it was he who founded it in the seas
and planted it firm on the waters beneath.*

Psalm 24: 1-2

The picture presented reflects the understanding that the Earth was floating on the depths but anchored by God's subduing of the powers of chaos. Though the imagery is now dated, the understanding presented - that the earth is God's rather than belonging to humanity - is a strong challenge to the principles of ownership that have developed, particularly in western economics. For example, over the past few centuries explorers have gone out from nations across Europe to plant a national flag and claim the territory for their nation in the name of their ruler.

An interpretation of the opening verses of Psalm 24 is that the earth should now be reclaimed as the Lord's. Such action would point us towards changing the nature of the relationship between humanity, land and God. If we understand the Earth as belonging to the Lord, then our relationship to God is more akin to a tenant occupying God's property, with the attendant privileges and responsibilities that this brings.

Holistic Vision

Caring for the 'poor and outcasts' is a Christian tradition developed from the Bible. In practice, Christian care is aimed both at providing relief from poverty and also tackling the roots of poverty. It is increasingly recognised that one such root of poverty is environmental conditions. Christian Aid now recognises that many recent so-called natural disasters involving floods or drought have been partly caused by climate change. A May 2000 briefing paper issued by Christian Aid entitled 'Unnatural Disasters' concluded that some of the world's poorest are losing their livelihood, land and life because of global warming.

Nearer home, a report produced in conjunction with Friends of the Earth entitled 'Equity and the Environment – Guidelines for green and socially just government' links poverty in the UK to local environmental conditions.

Both reports indicate that environmental damage has an impact on the world's poorest people. Whilst providing emergency relief is important, a key part of tackling the causes of poverty is to take the holistic view and care for the environment locally and globally.

God's promise of salvation for the whole of creation

The Bible records God's commitment to the whole of creation. In Genesis, the covenant given to Noah after the flood records God's promise:

*'I shall sustain my covenant with you:
never again will all living creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood,
never again will there be a flood to lay waste the earth.'*

*God said, 'For all generations to come,
this is the sign which I am giving of the covenant between myself and you and
all living creatures with you:
my bow I set in the clouds to be a sign of the covenant
between myself and the earth.'*

Genesis 9:11-13

This promise for all creatures is extended in the New Testament, when John records the words of Jesus regarding salvation:

*'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
that everyone who has faith in him may not perish but have eternal life.
It was not to judge the world that God sent his Son into the world,
but that through him the world might be saved.'*

John 3:16-17

The Revised English Bible, along with many other versions, translates the Greek word '*cosmos*' as 'world'. This translation fails to convey the message of God's commitment, spoken through Christ, that salvation shall extend not just to the world, but to the whole of creation.

The New Testament also records the renewal of the creation covenant established before Noah's. In Paul's letter to the Church at Corinth it is recorded:

*'For anyone united in Christ, there is a new creation:
the old order has gone;
a new order has already begun.'*

2 Corinthians 5:17

It reveals that through Christ there is both redemption and the establishment of a new order – brought about through God coming as Christ to earth.

Incarnation – a religion where matter really matters

If, as the animal charities' saying has it, 'the gift of a pet is not just for Christmas, but for life', so the gift of Jesus Christ is not just for special bits or moments in our world but for all of it. As Archbishop William Temple once put it, '*Christianity is the most materialistic of all religions*'. The heart of Christian faith is the proclamation of a very down-to-earth God, who not only creates and sustains the cosmos, but who is found within it, and who has taken on flesh with us in all aspects of our lives. As the doctrine of Incarnation declares, ultimate reality is manifested in Jesus Christ:

*the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation...
by whom and through whom all things were created.*

Colossians 1:15-16.

Such an understanding is vital to our times in two important ways.

Firstly, it encourages us to welcome new engagement with the natural world as a celebration of the Word or Wisdom of God present in creation. For since '*the world is filled with the glory of God*' (Isaiah 6:3; Psalm 19:1; Ephesians 4:6) ours is a 'sacramental universe' in which the Spirit of God is present 'in, with, and under' the natural elements. Caring for creation therefore is a way to deepen our Christian spirituality as we reconnect with the living God of creation. This is excitingly witnessed to in biblical encounters and theophanies, in traditions such as those of the Celtic saints, the Desert Fathers and Orthodox experience, in the Christian sacraments, and in the new physics and cosmology of our age.

Secondly, rejoicing in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, we are encouraged to give fresh meaning and purpose to the things of the earth, our bodies and our environment. In all that we do, touch, see, smell, taste or hear, we can share in the life of God. Not for nothing then is our hope summed up in the doctrine of the Resurrection of the Body. For so important is this sacramental understanding of our physical natures that, as St. Paul put it, we and all of creation:

*'are groaning in labour pains'
until we each achieve
'the redemption of our bodies'*

Romans 8:22-23

The 'end' of creation... a transformed creation

To those on the street, both Christianity and the environmental movement may be associated with doom and gloom. The message of the man clad in the sandwich board 'repent of your evil for the end of the world is nigh' seems to go hand in hand with the newspaper billboard declaring the latest earth-threatening environmental ill.

Within Christianity the subject of eschatology deals with matters concerning the last days. The Bible includes texts that point towards the 'end'. In the Old Testament this is often associated with the Messianic hope, or the coming of a future Messiah to rule, and in the New Testament to the second coming of Christ, or a day of judgement.

Christian understanding of the last days can influence the way in which people live their lives. In the early church Paul criticises those Christians who lived their lives on the understanding that Christ's return would definitely come within a few years or decades. It is a notion that has been repeated by so-called millenniumists, who have used dates or events to plot Christ's return. Such beliefs may lead people to question the need to care for the earth if life on earth as it is known is about to come to an end. These perspectives might appear validated by passages such as 2 Peter 3: 7-13, which may be interpreted with the message that the earth is to be consumed by fire and then replaced by a new one. If this is the case, many might ask: what is the point of caring for God's creation if God's grace is going to provide a new creation?

However, to date, the understanding of millenniumists has been found wanting. Further, there are questions concerning the translation of the Greek text. Whilst many translations have used the phrase 'it is burned up' or a variation on these words, the term 'will be found' is an alternative translation to be understood in the context of judgement and of acts of God in history, rather than the literal end of the world. Within this sense, the passage may be more readily understood as a call to radical transformation rather than the destruction of the present earth and the creation of a new one.

David Bosch writes that Christian eschatology moves in all three times: past, present and future. The reign of God has already come, is coming, and will come in fullness. It is a message of transformation with an understanding that human discipleship is called to play a missionary role in bringing about God's purpose. This understanding is consistent with the verse from the Lord's Prayer: 'your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' which is both a call to God and a challenge to the prevailing situation.

This understanding of Christian eschatology also unites the Doctrine of Creation with God's purpose for the last days. Through this understanding of eschatology, the Doctrine of Creation is not a one-off event but a continuing process of stewardship and co-creation to which all hands are called to contribute as companions with God. The fulfilment of the Doctrine of Creation is the true end of creation, which is not so much a sum of the individual contributions but the culmination of the work of God..

'The leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations'

Revelation 22: 2b REB

Mission and environment:

Caring for creation as an exercise in Christian discipleship

Christianity is a missionary faith. The end of the gospel of Matthew records the great commission given by Jesus to his disciples to go around the world making new disciples, to baptise people in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to teach people to follow his commandments.

The first apostles lived this commandment by taking the good news of Jesus around the Mediterranean and further afield and establishing the fledgling church with mission as a prime part of its purpose.

Through the years Christians have continued to undertake mission in various ways. Whilst the 19th century western mission may be characterised as taking God's message around the world, through the latter part of the 20th century an increasing emphasis has been placed on mission as the purpose of every place where the body of Christ meets in fellowship.

Within this context, in 1988 the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church developed a model of mission work for local churches. It has become known as the Five Marks of Mission.

These five marks have been accepted and developed in other denominations and around the world including, in 1997, the Forum of Churches Together in England (CTE). There are a number of versions of the Five Marks of Mission. The following version was adopted by CTE:

1. to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom
2. to teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. to respond to human need in loving service
4. to seek to transform the unjust structures of society
5. to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of earth

The marks are a useful tool for local congregations as they:

- are expressed in language that is readily understood by churchgoers
- act as a checklist for churches to assess their current mission work
- aid the formation of targets for more effective mission

The Five Marks of Mission were not defined as a set of aims for churches to 'pic n mix' from, but as a holistic model of Christian mission. This widely accepted framework can both encourage and help churches to incorporate care for God's creation into their programme of witness and outreach, rather than leaving it to the end of an already overcrowded agenda.

*Go therefore to all nations and make them my disciples;
baptise them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and
teach them to observe all that I have commanded you.
I will be with you always, to the end of time.*

Matthew 28:19-20

Models of **Caring for Creation**

The use of pictures and images has helped people express their understanding of the nature and person of God through the years. The Bible contains many such images, for example the Lord as a Shepherd, which help to convey an understanding of God.

In early Christian times the 'Trinity' was developed as one such model or image, to help people picture God who was revealed as Father/Creator, Son/Redeemer and Holy Spirit/Sustainer.

People of faith have also drawn on images from the Bible to develop models of the three-way relationship between God, God's people and the created order. The two creation stories in the book of Genesis draw on images of good agricultural practice. In the first story of creation, the sixth day includes a sense of calling to good husbandry, whilst in the command to till and care for the earth, the second garden story uses more arable imagery.

Together with other scriptures, these stories have led to the development of a variety of models describing the relationship between God, God's people and the rest of the created order. An outline of some of these models is presented below. Each model is subject to criticism, but taken together they can help to give a basis for developing an holistic Christian understanding of a proper human relationship to God and the environment.

- The two garden stories taken together with the message from the psalmist, that 'the Earth belongs to the Lord', have led to the development of the **stewardship** model. Stewardship is based on the premise that you are in charge of or have responsibility for something that doesn't belong to you. Stewardship may be perceived as a model that allows the concepts of both 'dominion' and 'subduing' to be held together. A good steward would exercise dominion or rule, not for self-aggrandisement, but on behalf of the landlord and for the benefit of all the creatures under his care and with respect for the physical property itself too. The stewardship model retains the relationship between humanity, the earth and God, for ultimately the steward is accountable to the one who vested the responsibility. However, a difficulty of the stewardship model is that it may become too human-orientated, and there may be a temptation on stewards to place human concerns at the centre.

- A different perspective is offered by the **co-creator** model. It is drawn from some of the ways that the Bible relates God with humanity. A starting point is the first creation story in Genesis 1:27, where it is recorded that we are made in the image of God:

*'God created human beings in his own image;
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.'*

Genesis 1:27

This concept is also dealt with in Psalm 8, which also has creation as its theme. In this psalm we read:

*Yet you have made him little less than a god,
crowning his head with glory and honour.
You make him master over all that you have made,
putting everything in subjection under his feet:
all sheep and oxen, all the wild beasts, the birds in the air, the fish in the sea
and everything that moves along ocean paths.'*

Psalm 8: 5-8

Within the context of subduing, the psalmist places humanity just below God in the heavenly order, and attributes almost god-like qualities to humanity. This approach, together with the understanding that God's creative activity continues, has given an insight of humanity as co-creators, working alongside God. As co-creators, humans are attributed with awesome powers and responsibilities. It is a model of privilege but with the danger that, by understanding ourselves as almost God-like, we are in danger of losing the balance and check that God provides and are open to human-centred decisions. The second 'garden' story of creation is a reminder that one of the consequences of playing God is separation from God.

- Another perspective has been derived from the understanding given in Genesis 1:27 that humans are made in the image of God. In some Christian traditions the priest takes on the role of mediator between the people and God. Extending this to the care of creation, the model of priestly care would be to oversee on behalf of God the care of creation and to offer this care back to God as part of Christian thanksgiving. This **priesthood** model helpfully includes the concept of acting for God, not like a god. Its basis is not that the care of creation is entrusted to the ordained part of the church, but rather that the whole of humanity is called to be a bridge between God and the rest of the created order, between God's purpose on Earth and God's purpose in heaven. Within this role of priesthood there is an understanding of not just offering sacrifices but taking on sacrifices as a loving act to bring about new life for all.

However, this concept is not readily translated across all Christian traditions, in part because of different understandings of the term priesthood and also because there is no clear need for a mediator between God and his creation.

- An associated model to that of co-creator and priesthood is the concept of **companion** with God. This model provides an image of walking with God and experiencing both the joys of creation and tensions of living within it. However, the term can be found wanting in times of difficulty. For example, applying the companion model to the present environmental crisis may give an image of both humanity and God bearing the pain and trials together. However, the model does not necessarily lead to a due sense of human responsibility for the state of the environment, the urgent need to take a new path and the direction of it.

- The term **covenant** is used in the Bible to describe an agreement or binding relationship, based on commitment. The Old Testament is laid on the foundation of a covenant between God and God's people, Israel. It is an understanding that is developed in the New Testament where, through Christ's life and death, God offers grace to an imperfect humanity. The Old Testament records that obedience may be rewarded by a blessing: for example in Leviticus 26:4 a string of such blessings is offered, including the arrival of rain to swell the crops, if the people obey God's laws and commands. Conversely, later in the same chapter (24:18f), it is made clear that the failure to adhere to God's commands will lead to a series of punishments. Within a covenant setting, God's blessing is contingent on observing God's commands which cover a number of areas including some environmental issues!

Whilst many covenants recorded in the Old Testament are of a secular nature, between two leaders, or have a divine/human nature, between God and God's people, the covenant made before Noah at the end of the flood, and recorded in Genesis 9 has a universal aspect. It is made by God to 'every living creature' and reminds us of the value God attaches to all life.

- Many of the above models have been derived largely from western Christian tradition and thought. However, in recent years the value of an eastern model has come to the fore. An approach of the Orthodox tradition emphasises the place humanity has within the created order. Humanity, along with the other living and non-living components of creation, is **co-created**, a part of the created order in which God takes delight. A proper response to the creating God is to worship God and respect the rest of the created order.

- A final model is that of **belonging**. The people of Israel belonged to families, to tribes and ultimately to God. Belonging is a model that encompasses the relationships of individuals and groups to each other and also the relationship of humanity to God. To 'belong' has notions of both privilege and responsibility, which have a dynamic quality. The Old Testament laid the basis of human relationship to the land and with it came both the privilege of being able to live in a place overflowing with milk and honey and the responsibility to care for it.

To belong involves all in civic responsibility, though for the model to work well within the current environmental situation, the people need to understand that they belong not just to human communities but also relate to other life and the land too.

The above models all offer helpful insights into the proper relationship between humanity, the rest of the created order and God. Whilst none of these models provide a comprehensive framework, they do contain some pictures which, taken together, may offer a more sustainable model to guide our way of life than the current one which dominates our world, based on the foundation of unfettered economic growth and human greed.

Selected references for further reading

- *Caring for Creation*, edited by Sarah Tillett Bible Reading Fellowship, 2005. – A series of essays on various theological topics with companion chapters from the experience of A Rocha projects around the world in putting belief into action.
- *Caring for Creation in your own Backyard*, L. & M. R. Wilkinson, Regent Vancouver, 1992 - Out of print, but dynamite if you can get it from Amazon!
- *Earthtrek: celebrating and sustaining God's creation*, Joanne Moyer 2004, Herald Press, Waterloo, Ont. Originally produced as an online study and devotion series and titled – “7-Days-It is still good.”
- *Earthwise*, Calvin De Witt, CRC Publications, 1994
Excellent bible study.
- *For the Beauty of the Earth*, Steven Bouma-Prediger, Baker Academic, 2002
Simply the best student text-book on the subject. Passionate, accurate, inspiring.
- *Jesus and the Earth*, Bishop James Jones, SPCK, 2003
The Bishop's eco-conversion as he re-reads the Gospels to see what Jesus said
- *Living the Good Life on God's Good Earth*, Faith Alive Books, 2006
Bible Study series on caring for creation, excellent.
- *Redeeming Creation: The Biblical Basis for Environmental Stewardship*, Fred Vandyke et. Al. Intervarsity Press, 1996. - Written by four Christian biologists bringing scripture in to dialogue with current scientific findings and commitments.
- *Serve God, Save the Planet: A Christian Call to Action*, J. Matthew Sleeth, Zondervan, 2007 – A must read for all who care about the planet this unique book tells the story of Matthew Sleeth's journey to a heightened awareness of ecological issues through his work as an ER doctor and what he and his family did to reduce their impact.
- *The Best Preaching on Earth: Sermons on Caring for Creation*. Stan L. LeQuire, ed. Judson Press, 1996 – Great sermons to encourage pastors to preach creation care.
- *Under the Bright Wings*, Peter Harris
Inspiring story of God's call and a human response, that led to A Rocha's work
- *Kingfisher's Fire*, Peter Harris
The continuation of A Rocha's story after 20+ years and 16 A Rocha projects on 5 continents.

About **Eco-Congregation**

Eco-Congregation is an ecumenical environmental project for churches in Britain, Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Canada. It provides free resources, support and an Award program to help churches to consider environmental issues in the context of their Christian life and mission and to take positive action. Eco-Congregation was originally developed by the environmental charity ENCAMS on behalf of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI). It is now overseen by CTBI and delivered by a partnership of organisations.

In Canada, Eco-congregation is managed and delivered by A Rocha Canada.

Contact: A Rocha Canada, 512 172 Street, Surrey, B.C. V3S 9R3

Tel: 604 542-9022

Email: canada@arocha.org

Web: www.arocha.org/canada

In England, Eco-Congregation is managed by A Rocha UK and supported by a grant from the Methodist Relief and Development Fund. The office base is at The Arthur Rank Centre (ARC). Contact: 024 7669 2491, Email: ecocongregation@arocha.org , Web: www.ecocongregation.org/englandwales

In Scotland, Eco-Congregation is managed and delivered through a partnership between Keep Scotland Beautiful (an Associated company of ENCAMS) and the Society, Religion and Technology Project (SRT) of the Church of Scotland. It is endorsed by Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) and is supported financially by the Scottish Executive's Sustainable Action Fund. Contact : +44 (0)131 556 2953 , Email: ecocongregation@srtp.org.uk , Web: www.ecocongregation.org/scotland

Churches in Wales are supported by Eco-Congregation based at the Arthur Rank Centre.