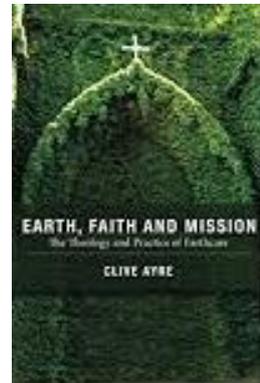
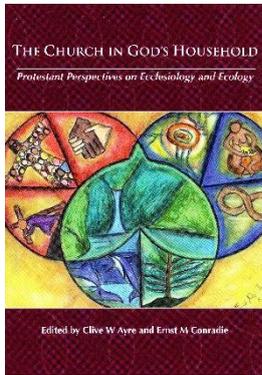


Ecumenical Care for Creation The Current Ecumenical Response

Clive W Ayre

My task is to address the current ecumenical response to Earthcare. I will be treating the “oikoumene”, the whole inhabited Earth, in the widest expression of its meaning. Much of what I will say can be found in my book, *Earth Faith and Mission*, as well as in *The Church in God’s Household* (edited with Ernst Conradie), essays in the Australian Journal of Mission Studies Dec 2016, and in other published essays. This will be a type of brief summary.



Introductory Comments

There is one thing we all share – the planet Earth, our home. It is full of diversity, and yet there is a profound underlying unity. As people of faith, it is important to recognise that there is far more to unite us than there is to divide us. One of the hardest lessons we learn is how to handle difference and diversity in a positive way. That is certainly relevant in terms of the care of creation. We can affirm right at the outset that whatever may be the real or perceived differences between us, there is profound agreement on most aspects of our approach to creation care.

Ecumenical Agreement

I’m not going to attempt to rehash what I have written in my book, but chapter 6 in particular is called “The Big Picture”, and in it I point to the wide body of literature and Official Statements from every conceivable position on the Christian spectrum, and many different parts of the world – Orthodox and Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, The Salvation Army, Evangelical groups, Society of Friends, Reformed and Methodist, in addition to prominent scientists who are also prominent Christians, and so on. There may be slight differences in emphasis or expression, but essentially, they are all “on the same page” in their response.

The World Council of Churches has long been an advocate for Earthcare, and this ecumenical agreement has resulted in quite a number of official Statements and commitments over many decades.

In 1992 the WCC participated in the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro, which resulted in the book *Redeeming the Creation*. Having declared that “The earth is in peril”, and that “We are at the precipice of self-destruction”, they declared that “it is extremely urgent that we as churches make strong and permanent spiritual, moral and material commitments to the emergence of new models of society, based in deepest gratitude to God for the gift of life and in respect for the whole of God’s creation”.

A more recent example was the WCC Green Churches Conference held at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey (Switzerland) in June 2014. It was titled “Green Churches: Ecology, Theology and Justice in Practice” Note the last word in that title! The stated aim included these words: “This seminar will seek to map the different efforts and initiatives in making the link between ecology, theology and justice viable, and by drawing attention to the potential for churches to develop viable, applied ethical responses and alternatives to the menace to nature from within their tradition”. The common aim is that of a sustainable world for tomorrow. Places on the course were strictly limited, and were distributed globally with participants from 26 countries. The resulting Report was important, and included follow-up commitments relating to various parts of the globe, including the South Pacific. However, to the best of my knowledge that follow-up has never taken place. We need to follow-through on commitments we have made, and move beyond words.

The NCCA has also been active over the years. For example, in 2006 a statement called “Sustaining Creation” raised a number of basic issues, but while it acknowledged that “we will do all in our power through the churches”, it was primarily addressed to government, and what they should do.

Interfaith

Agreement extends to the Interfaith space. One particularly valuable resource is a book published by the UNEP in 2000, and called *Earth and Faith: a Book of Reflection for Action*. This book calls on official Statements from all the major religions of the world, and demonstrates very clearly that whether one is a Christian, a Hindu, or whatever, we are all called by our respective Faiths to care for the Earth which we see as God’s creation.



I have participated in 3 different interfaith fora over the last 10 years or so, and without qualification, it has been a positive experience. The last time was at the Buddha Birthday celebration in 2016. I was the last of 5 speakers, and I recall my opening remark: “I do not disagree with anything that any of the previous speakers

said”. This comes back to the fundamental point that some things rise above partisan approaches, since we are all people of Earth.

One practical example that is well worth noting from a Muslim perspective is the al-Ghazali Centre in Sydney. In 2009 I heard a lecture at UQ on “Islam, Justice, and Compassion” by Imam Afroz Ali, the founder of the Centre; this is rather wider than just environmental concerns, but I found it to be a very impressive and inspiring story. Another response that seeks to give expression to this is the group known as ARRCC – Australian Religious Response to Climate Change. In the spirit of *oikoumene*, it is imperative that we take hold of this very broad agreement and respond as fully as we are able.

Eco Mission Project/Network

In 2012 the NCCA agreed to the formation of what we called the Eco Mission Project, and I was part of that until several years ago. Norman Habel and I both pushed hard for that, but the outcome was disappointing. Membership was limited to one person per denomination, and meetings were held occasionally via telephone. There was no budget; and not surprisingly, no real outcome either. I don’t want to downplay the difficulties from an NCCA perspective, but quite simply it didn’t work.

QCEN

A significant ecumenical response took place in 2012 with the formation of QCEN, and I believe this has proved to be an effective instrument. We now have 6 branches of the Church involved, and you would know from regular reports how this is progressing. Ecumenical agreement and action has centred on various issues, such as coal seam gas, the impact of mining, carbon reduction, renewable energy, or we could think of the “Open Letter from Australian Religious Leaders” in June 2013.

Beyond Words

Agreements and the like are of course important, but they are no more than a beginning. Words are relatively easy, but they are not enough. The real clue is in what we do. Over the course of ecumenical history there have been a great many commitments made, for instance Lund 1952. The **Lund Principle** affirms that churches should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately. This means, as one person put it, that instead of doing ecumenical things, Christians and churches should try to do things ecumenically. If we were to take that seriously, it could be far-reaching, and certainly it is apt in terms of caring for creation.

However, it would be quite wrong and indeed mischievous, to suggest that as churches, both individually and together, we are not taking action; clearly we are active, in all sorts of ways. Much of the action is of course within individual denominations and congregations, albeit with some significant sharing; themes include worship and spirituality, children and youth, policy issues, prophetic elements, community projects, education, media usage, personal lifestyle, and overall integration. Part of that Green Churches event of 2014 included reports of what churches around the world are doing. My concern here is that at an ecumenical level we tend to make agreements, and then fail to carry through with our commitments. We get side-tracked by the steady advance of busyness.

Conclusion

One of the strongest statements, I believe, came from the United States in an Open Letter to Church and Society in 2005. It said, in part:

This is not a competing ‘program alternative’, one issue among many. In this most critical moment in Earth’s history, we are convinced that the central moral imperative of our time is care for Earth as God’s creation.... We believe that caring for creation must undergird, and be entwined with, all other dimensions of our churches’ ministries. We are convinced that it is no longer acceptable to claim to be ‘church’ while continuing to perpetuate, or even permit, the abuse of Earth as ‘God’s creation’.

In conclusion, a number of points may be noted.

First, what is happening to the Earth is starting to become abundantly clear, and whether we are of this faith, that faith, or no faith at all, we have an opportunity and obligation to demonstrate that there is far more that unites us than divides us. This is not a competition, but an environmental crisis-in-process that calls forth our best combined effort.

Second, from a Christian ecumenical perspective, we have the opportunity, in the company of others, to give a lead. We can give thanks to God for the resources and agreement already at our disposal, and pray that we will be wise and effective stewards of the good gifts of God.

The current ecumenical response, in official terms, is crystal clear in terms of agreement on the situation before us, even though we all have our share of nay-sayers. The challenge is to upgrade, if we can, our communication with each other and the community at large, and the level of our practical response.