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GRADUATE PROGRAMS IN PASTORAL COUNSELING AND SPIRITUAL CARE

The Green Gospel

Will seminaries equip church leaders for an age of environmental crisis?

by Katharine M. Preston

◀PREVIOUS

We firmly believe that addressing the degradation of God's sacred Earth is the moral assignment of our time, comparable to the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s, the worldwide movement to achieve equality for women, or ongoing efforts to control weapons of mass destruction in a post-Hiroshima world. — From the National Council of Churches Open Letter to Church and Society in the United States, February 2005

Brad Hirst, pastor of the Second Christian Congregational Church of Kittery, Maine, rummages through trashcans for recyclable bottles, cans, glass, and discarded bulletins. He is critical of SUVs and suggests paying more for renewable power, even when the church budget is tight. He knows that global warming contributed to the severity of Hurricane Katrina by super-heating the Gulf waters. So, although pleased with his church's compassionate financial response to the ravaged Gulf Coast, he feels it's his pastoral duty to help his congregation recognize the connection between lifestyle choices in Maine that contribute to global warming and the lives of the marginalized in Louisiana.

Raising a congregation's environmental consciousness is a slow process. Hirst feels only partially prepared—yet he has more experience with this issue than most church leaders.

For one year during his seminary training at Andover Newton Theological School in Newton, Mass., Hirst was the "ecology minister," an onsite field education position developed to increase environmental awareness campus-wide. He found it extremely difficult to engage students, faculty, and staff in conversation about stemming the degradation of God's sacred earth. Most people seemed to leave their environmental concerns at home. With the exception of an elective or two, eco-justice (the connection between ecological integrity and social equity) or creation care (stewardship of God's creation) were rarely part of any religious discussion, let alone part of Hirst's formal seminary training.

FOR 40 YEARS, since the publication of historian Lynn White's seminal essay accusing Western religious traditions of providing the roots for the environmental crisis, the church has struggled to redeem itself. Progress has been slow but steady, especially recently, as environmental awareness has permeated the minds of the general public.

Most denominations now have carefully worded resolutions on creation care and global warming; some have Sunday school curricula or congregational programs to green the church. Interfaith Power and Light programs, active in 23 states, mobilize churches to reduce carbon emissions. A religious environmental leaders group was recently formed by nonprofits such as Earth Ministry in Seattle and GreenFaith in New Jersey. There are outstanding interfaith associations, such as the National Religious Partnership for the Environment; academic programs, such as the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale; and ecumenical gatherings, such as those sponsored biannually by the National Council of Churches (NCC), highlighting the theological, biblical, ethical, and pastoral foundations of faith-based eco-justice and creation care.

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More recently, religious people have become involved with national and even international public policy issues. A group of faith communities wrote a "Spiritual Declaration on Climate Change" for the 2005 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Montreal. Last year dozens of evangelical leaders signed the Evangelical Climate Initiative, calling for federal legislation to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, and the NCC submitted an amicus brief to the Supreme Court on the lawsuit filed against the EPA to force its regulation of greenhouse gas emissions.

Despite these initiatives, research by Laurel Kearns of Drew Theological School and others shows that cultural changes at the congregational level remain limited. Lay individuals passionate about issues such as global warming often feel like voices in the wilderness in their local churches. One reason may be that few pastors and church leaders had sufficient exposure to faith-based environmentalism during their seminary training to feel committed or able to encourage congregational efforts.

THREE MAJOR STUMBLING blocks hinder seminaries from taking on this critical role of preparing new church leaders.

The first, prevalent in evangelical seminaries and possibly more present in mainline institutions than is admitted: hesitancy to engage in the conversation until creation care and eco-justice are vetted to be a) thoroughly scripturally grounded (that is, not nature worship) and b) distinguishable, theologically and operationally, from a broader liberal political agenda.

Biblical scholars have had no problem addressing the former; numerous books and articles establish the scriptural basis for creation care. The political concern is harder to address, but secular environmentalists have begun to gain the trust of people of faith. Mutual concern for the poor in the face of global warming especially provides new opportunities for collaboration.

The second stumbling block—systemic to First World society, not just the church—persists despite the recent upsurge of environmental concern: a failure to fully acknowledge the moral and spiritual severity of the problem and the lifestyle changes needed to help mitigate the effects of overconsumption.

Bill McKibben, author and lay church leader, points out that the church has only just begun to address people-to-nature relationships. Everything we do in the name of God and of Christ is based on a bedrock assumption that the earth will somehow continue to form a reliable substrate for our existence. But will it? The inhabitants of New Orleans, Bangladesh, and Greenland are not so sure. What if God "chooses" to preserve life on earth at the expense of our species? What are the psychological and pastoral ramifications for people now facing these kinds of questions? Might there be such a thing as "eco-despair" to be ministered to by clergy? What exactly should faith communities be *doing* about all this?

To avoid these profound theological, ethical, and pastoral considerations is to deny our responsibility to engage in God's work of justice and love of creation. To overlook the complexities of the conversation in the training of church leaders is simply irresponsible.

"Unless the seminaries are prepared to raise up effective leadership for this situation, Christians will once again be contributing to the problem rather than being pioneers who generate solutions," says David Rhoads, a professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. "To this end, every seminarian and every pastor should have at least one course that introduces them to the information, resources, and skills necessary to offer effective environmental leadership in their congregations and in their communities."

Here we encounter the third stumbling block.

With few exceptions, seminaries and theological schools have neither the resources nor sufficient individuals qualified to teach and lead them in addressing 21st century environmental concerns.

They have had chances to do better. In 1992, the Center for Respect of Life and Environment and the Program on Ecology, Justice, and Faith funded a strategic initiative to introduce environmental concerns into seminary education. Theological Education to Meet the Environmental Challenge (TEMEC) dispersed about \$160,000 during the 1990s, especially to "lead institutions" identified as potential models for teaching green pastoring. The grants fostered an eco-justice emphasis in curriculum, encouraged green practices in the institution, and promoted public outreach and action.

But the prophetic voices were often not heard, and today, vibrant, ongoing programs exist only at a couple of these seminaries and a handful of new ones.

Despite the church's historical leadership at the forefront of some social movements, seminaries retain a culture of dispassionate academic inquiry that often clashes with the call to advocacy. Without ongoing leadership, time, and resources, programs do not become part of the ethos of the institution. Success, therefore, is usually linked to the long-term dedication of one or two individuals.

With such persistence, a seminary can become a model for how to appropriately address environmental challenges and a vital training ground for new leaders.

THE LUTHERAN SCHOOL of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) was one of the first "lead institutions" for TEMEC. Due to indefatigable leadership by Rhoads, eco-justice and creation care now appear throughout the curriculum; an environmental emphasis is offered for students who want to specialize in eco-justice leadership. Field education, clinical pastoral education, and internship options aim to educate students about the social ramifications of urban environmental problems. LSTC has been a "green zone" for 17 years, dedicated to practicing care for the earth in its geographical space and communal life. The admissions office estimates that about 10 percent of new students each year come to LSTC specifically because of its green reputation. Perhaps more important, no student leaves without some exposure to these concerns.

This leadership extends beyond LSTC's walls through the ecumenical "Web of Creation" site (www.webofcreation.org), which has resources for congregations and individuals. A new feature, the "Green Seminary Initiative," invites seminaries and theological schools to submit copies of pertinent syllabi and describe steps they are taking to promote eco-justice and creation care. A "Green Seminary" certification process is under consideration.

Training more doctoral students to be future seminary teachers of eco-justice and creation care is vital. At Drew Theological School, Laurel Kearns, associate professor of the sociology of religion and environmental studies, and Catherine Keller, professor of theology, have mentored more than 25 Ph.D. students, including Jim Ball, executive director of the Evangelical Environmental Network. Many of these alumni now teach relevant courses at seminaries in the U.S., Canada, and South Korea. Drew offers a certificate program for church camp and retreat leaders and a doctor of ministry degree in environmental ministries and ecological spirituality for pastors and lay leaders. Renowned eco-theologian Jay McDaniel will co-teach the next program.

But such faith-based environmental programs are rare. Many seminary graduates will have no exposure in a classroom setting to *any* discussion of eco-justice or creation care.

We are entering an age in which environmental crises and related issues of justice will dominate our life together on this planet. If the church is to be relevant in the world, then the church and its academic underpinnings need to get moving.

"Our religious communities are deeply important," says Bill McKibben, "because they are almost the only institutions left in our society that posit some goal other than accumulation for our existence here on this planet."

If seminarians can learn to meet the administrative, pastoral, and ethical challenges of forming an environmentally responsive and responsible ministry, they will be a resource for more than the church. From effectively dealing with feelings of helplessness and despair to stimulating moral consciousness and action on issues ranging from global warming to biodiversity, religious leaders can become community leaders, as some did in the movements to abolish slavery and secure civil rights. We must not underestimate the critical role that seminaries, and by extension pastors and their churches, can play in healing our relationship to God's earth.

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