

**An Invitation  
from  
The Bishops of The United Methodist Church  
for  
Conversation and Christian Action  
To Prepare a New *In Defense of Creation* Statement**

The time has come for the church to renew the United Methodist bishops' 1986 pastoral letter, *In Defense of Creation*. An action by the 2004 General Conference determined "that the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church will be charged and funded to publish a new document and study guide similar to *In Defense of Creation*." As bishops of the church we have welcomed this opportunity to speak afresh on issues of urgent importance. The General Conference reminded the church that *In Defense of Creation* was published at the height of the nuclear arms race in 1986. It is time for a new look and a broadened sense of the issues the world faces in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We invite participation by the whole church in this important venture.

When *In Defense of Creation* was published, the world had come very close to a nuclear disaster. Both of the great nuclear powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, had the capacity to destroy human civilization. Reputable scientists feared that life itself on planet earth might become extinct after a full-scale nuclear war. The pastoral letter was a response to this perilous situation. It came as an urgent reminder that this world is God's creation, a sacred gift to be received and nurtured with respect.

Now, more than two decades later, we face a very different situation. Thankfully, the Cold War is over. But the United States of America and the Russian Federation still stockpile large numbers of nuclear weapons, with awesome potential. Since the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty entered into force in 1970, the list of nations having nuclear weapons has expanded. It now includes India, Pakistan, China, and, although unacknowledged, Israel and North Korea. South Africa has renounced its nuclear weapons ambitions, but the list of countries with the potential to become nuclear powers is growing.

Even apart from the nuclear peril, the world confronts realities of violence and terrorism on a large scale. Weapons and explosives are widely available and freely used, with lethal, sometimes even genocidal results, as groups seek to settle old scores or redress injustices. Even conflicts of years past still exact a dreadful human toll, with landmines and other left-over explosives continuing to maim and destroy. While such weaponry is not nuclear, it is deadly. In the United States, new anxieties have been aroused by the attacks on September 11, 2001. Insecurity has become a fact of life for people throughout the world.

This new situation is even more complicated by the interconnections between the ongoing nuclear danger and realities of violence and new environmental concerns as well as the continuing struggles by hundreds of millions of the world's people for basic economic subsistence. The consequences of global warming are becoming real faster than scientists predicted. New technologies make unprecedented global communication and trade possible, but never reach millions of the neediest. We wish, in a new pastoral letter to address these very important relationships. We need the thoughtful help of our fellow United Methodists.

### **Basic Theological Issues**

The 1986 pastoral letter was broadly framed by our common theological heritage. Drawing upon the rich imagery of the Hebrew concept of *Shalom*, the letter spoke of that vision of peace and well-being as God's intention through creation and as finding its fulfillment in the redemptive love of Jesus Christ. The call to the church was to be “a loving and peaceable international company of disciples transcending all governments, races, and ideologies; reaching out to all ‘enemies’; and ministering to all the victims of poverty and oppression.” (P. 37)

The theological perspective expressed there is timeless. We are impressed, anew, by its relevance to a broken world in which we have been summoned to make disciples of Jesus Christ and “to engage in the struggle for justice and reconciliation.” Through our faithful service to Christ, we are called “to reveal the love of God for men, women, and children of all ethnic, racial, cultural, and national backgrounds and to demonstrate the healing power of the gospel with those who suffer.” (2004 *Book of Discipline*, Par. 124)

In fulfilling this mission, why has the “Defense of Creation” engaged us with such urgency? Creation is, of course, vastly larger than this planet which is our home. Reputable scientists estimate that the universe contains more than one hundred billion times one hundred billion stars, and nobody knows how many planets may exist supporting a life like ours. The sheer grandeur of the universe shows that the biblical vision of God's creation is deep and rich beyond human imagining. The whole of human history is but a drop in this vast ocean of God's making, most of it beyond anything humanity can do for good or ill. Then why our concern for this part of creation where human action can matter very much?

Our part of creation matters for two important reasons. First, as numbers of twentieth century theologians remind us, creation sustains human life. As Karl Barth puts it, “creation is the basis and precondition of the covenant.” Without the tangible, visible, material creation, the spiritual covenant we have with God and one another would not be possible. We need certain conditions to be enabled to exist on earth. It is not that the material conditions of existence are themselves the meaning of our spiritual covenant, but in the providence of God they are the ground upon which we can stand, the setting in which we can flourish. The divine-human covenant is what gives meaning to those works of creation, but when deprived of adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care and other necessities of life, humanity cannot, on earth, fulfill God's loving intentions. So creation is in the service of our spiritual destiny as children of God.

But that is not all. There is also something *intrinsically good and beautiful* about creation. In the very first chapter of the Bible, it is said after several of God's works of creation that "God saw that it was good." Thus, even before the creation of humanity, God took pleasure in this work of creation, finding it intrinsically good and not only good because it was intended for humanity's use. Thus, in the unfolding drama of God's creation of humanity and the invitation to humanity to become a part of the covenant, we are invited by God to share this divine pleasure, to enjoy creation as God enjoys creation.

We know not the particulars of the far reaches of the heavens and the possible existence of numberless planets and peoples. We are responsible before God for our part of the creation, as we are invited by God into loving relationship here on this beautiful place that is our home. It is for the sake of enabling all to find here the basis of their fulfillment; it is also to help cultivate this garden in which God has placed us and not to despoil it by our folly.

We, as bishops of the church, invite all our sisters and brothers in the faith to join in careful consideration of the issues and problems facing us all in a challenging new world situation. We offer the following questions for consideration, to stimulate debate and discussion:

### **Questions Related to the Continuing Nuclear Peril**

Several of the questions, to be addressed now, concern the continuing nuclear peril. The world situation may be different from the time of our 1986 statement, but nuclear weaponry is no less deadly. Its potential use may, with its increased proliferation, be even more imminent. So we must think with great care about such questions as the following:

1. How secure are existing stockpiles of nuclear weapons and component material in the United States, Russia, and elsewhere? Countries aspiring to become nuclear powers are predictably willing to pay large sums of money to acquire such weapons. That might be all the more true of terrorist groups against whom the threat of nuclear retaliation would be much less credible. What safeguards are in place to ensure that sale of such weapons and related materials on a nuclear black market will not occur?
2. Apart from the possible sale of existing weapons, but given the increased accessibility of knowledge and basic fissionable materials, how can nuclear proliferation be contained over the long run—or even in the short run? What is the relationship between nuclear proliferation and the likelihood of nuclear accidents?
3. What are the risks of nuclear weapons being developed, using public information and readily available materials, by irresponsible small countries and other, more clandestine groups?
4. To what extent can nuclear weapons be miniaturized and, escaping detection, be transported across national borders and detonated in large cities?

5. What have been the consequences of United States withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty? What should U.S. policy be regarding a missile defense program? What is the impact of an ABM program on perceptions of security and distribution of limited economic resources? What responses will it elicit in other countries?
6. What might be the predictable consequences of total nuclear disarmament by the United States and other major nuclear powers? How might a feasible process toward disarmament be launched, leading to a downward rather than an upward spiral of weaponry? How should the international community counter nuclear “blackmail” by rogue states and terrorist groups?
7. Should we again, as in the 1986 pastoral letter, oppose nuclear deterrence? How does deterrence function without U.S./Soviet enmity as its root?
8. How should the church respond to plans for replacement and upgrading of existing nuclear stockpiles, both within the U.S. and elsewhere?
9. How can radioactive waste material, including that from civil nuclear power plants, be handled and transported safely? Can it be stored and safeguarded for thousands of years into the future?
10. What structures protecting national and international security can be advocated by the churches?
11. What initiatives should the United Nations undertake to prevent non-nuclear states (such as Iran and North Korea) from acquiring such weapons? What role should the application of international sanctions play?
12. How should we address the moral issues comparing the terrible destruction of nuclear weapons to that of other weapons of mass destruction?
13. What are their strengths and limitations of criteria of “just war” in this time? Are they still of any use?

### **Questions Related to Global Poverty**

The church has always been concerned about poverty, at least when it has responded faithfully to Christ, whose own response came out of deep caring. The Wesleys, Otterbein, Albright and other of our United Methodist spiritual forebears made this concern central as they proclaimed the gospel in their times and places. We can do no less in ours, recognizing as well how poverty intersects with other urgent problems of our time.

1. What are the best current estimates of the extent of global poverty and its trends?

2. To what extent can the poverty of poorer countries be attributed to the wealth and power of countries like the United States and those of Western Europe? To what can poverty within the United States and Western Europe be attributed?
3. How should we understand the complex relationship between globalization and poverty? Which forms of globalization should be supported by the churches and which forms opposed?
4. What should the churches' stance be regarding free trade agreements as a cause of continued poverty or as a way of increasingly alleviating poverty?
5. To what extent do impoverished Developing World countries need investment from prosperous countries and access to their markets? What harm might such investment cause?
6. What are the best ways of protecting workers in impoverished countries from dehumanizing exploitation? What is the impact of international regimes created by trade organizations, such as NAFTA and the WTO, on workers in impoverished countries?
7. What economic assets, other than their cheap labor supplies, might impoverished countries develop to become more prosperous?
8. How does poverty in some countries impact international patterns of emigration and immigration? What is happening with skilled workers and professionals in current patterns of emigration? How might such patterns be changed?
9. What should the churches' response be to the moral issues raised by the use of barriers to immigration, particularly in context of the challenges of poverty?
10. What are the moral consequences of vast disparities of wealth and income within and among nations? What is the theological significance of economic disparities even when they do not represent the presence or absence of what is required for physical health and well-being?
11. Can innovation and productivity be enhanced through appeals to socially responsible motivations? Can such motivations balance self-interest or even greed?
12. What is sustainable agriculture? How close are actual agricultural practices to being truly sustainable? What is the relationship between current levels of agricultural production and long-run environmental stability? What is the impact of most modern agricultural methods on genetic diversity in crops? How much such diversity is sufficient for the future?
13. What specific, practical ideas and programs are most helpful in combating poverty? Some examples to consider could be:
  - Micro-credit (Extending small loans to heads of families, frequently women, to enable income generation)

- Nothing but Nets (A program of the United Nations Foundation to fight malaria through distribution of low-cost mosquito nets)
- Tobin Tax (A proposed tax on all trade of currency across borders, intended to put a penalty on short-term speculation in currencies, named for economist James Tobin)
- McGovern/Dole universal school lunch program (An initiative developed by former Senator George McGovern to assure children in all parts of the world a nutritious lunch at school every day. The United Nations agencies and Secretary General endorsed the plan, as did a few other countries. In company with former Senator Robert Dole, McGovern presented the idea to then President Bill Clinton, who earmarked \$300 million for pilot programs. Congress has subsequently provided modest support, ranging from \$100 to 200 million annually.)

14. What programs and policies have already proved effective in reducing poverty?

15. What structures need to be put in place to strengthen economic development, for example, independent judicial systems, effective civil police, structures for reducing corruption?

### **Environmental Questions**

The defense of God's creation entails protection of the environment. The following questions point to problems and dilemmas for Christians who seek to be good stewards of God's priceless gift, the earth, which can be profoundly affected, for good or ill, by human actions.

1. If the natural world has intrinsic value, beyond its usefulness to human beings, how can that value be nurtured and supported?
2. How should churches respond to the debate over global warming? What is the relevant scientific evidence on this issue? What policies and practices should the churches support?
3. How should we respond to the increased pressure the quest for wealth places on the environment? And to the environmental pressures brought about by the struggle of poor people to achieve even minimal subsistence levels?
4. As the developing countries continue their economic growth, how can the world accommodate ever-increasing demands for energy? Are there sufficient energy resources, yet undeveloped, to meet such demands without further ecological injury? Can the sun, winds, tides, etc. be harnessed to generate energy on a vast enough scale?
5. With nuclear fission in commercial use and nuclear fusion impracticable to date, what role should nuclear energy play in the future as a safe, renewable source of energy?
6. What insufficiently explored ways of lessening the demand for energy might there be? For example, can less energy-dependent forms of transportation be encouraged? What global impact

might taxes on fuel for air travel have? Should greater reliance upon rail transportation be encouraged within densely populated regions, thus leading to fewer passenger miles of air travel? Should mass rapid transit be developed more widely within cities, thus lessening the use of automobiles? What might policies currently in place in some of the U.S. national parks teach us as a model for urban environments?

7. What should the role of gasoline taxes be, both within the United States and around the world, in discouraging excessive use of automobiles? What is the impact of gasoline taxes on poor people?

8. What are the most promising international initiatives (for example the “Green Cross” in Geneva) for moving toward environmental sustainability?

### **Recognizing the Connections between Problems and Solutions**

This listing of questions needing honest exploration by Christians and other persons of good will demonstrates the interlocking character of the three great foci of our proposed pastoral letter. Besides threatening destructiveness on a huge scale, nuclear weapons consume vast resources needed for economic development. Peaceful uses of nuclear energy might be harnessed in positive economic directions provided, however, that detrimental environmental consequences can be avoided. The co-existence in the world of very rich and very poor people indirectly, and sometimes very directly, foments conflict within and among nations and deepens the insecurity of rich and poor alike. Some forms of economic development are demonstrably harmful to the environment. More extreme versions of the ecology movement may be insensitive to the economic needs of poor people. And so, on and on go the vicious cycles of mutually reinforcing problems.

If the vicious cycles are to be broken, it will require the most careful thinking by all people of good will, among whom faithful Christians must be numbered. We cannot presume to resolve all of the issues, even after the best preparation we can summon. But we can do no less than our best, drawing upon the varied resources of heart and mind and will of a great church.

The conversation to which we invite the church and the document to follow will be focused on better understanding of the world and Christian responsibility. But the process upon which have embarked is not a substitute for action by Christians. Even as we engage in this conversation, new opportunities may emerge that must be seized. Action can contribute to greater understanding, just as study and conversation can help us better frame what we are called by God to do in the world.

Thus, we invite all United Methodists to participate with us in this journey. The Council of Bishops has appointed a Task Force of bishops to manage the process, chaired by Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker of the Florida Conference. That Task Force will hold a two-day national hearing in Washington, DC in October 2007. All annual conferences, seminaries and interested

bodies are invited to hold their own hearings on these issues during 2007 or 2008 and submit the material from these hearings to the bishops' Task Force by September 1, 2008. The Task Force plans to compile these findings into a Pastoral Letter and Foundation Document, as was the case in the 1986 statement. The Council of Bishops plans to give final approval to these materials in May 2009 and release them to the church for prayerful study and action.

(End)