

Introducing “The Earth Charter” to the Upstate New York Synod and the ELCA

Background Information on the Need to Repair the Damage to Creation

As we have passed the 25th year since the social statement, *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope & Justice*, was issued, we are forced to confront the reality that despite our best intentions the state of the natural world has declined precipitously in the intervening 25 years.

“Burgeoning populations and growing economies are pushing environmental systems to destabilizing limits.”¹ Human population reached 7 billion people in 2011, and is expected to reach nearly 10 billion by 2050. The 7 billion population figure represents a quadrupling of world population in just 100 years. At the time of the social statement, world population stood at 5.5 billion people.

The Gross Domestic product in the United States has increased more than 20-fold during the 20th century, so the scale of materials consumed by the human population is the same as major global material flows in eco-systems, (e.g. the amount of biomass produced annually by green plants)¹. The global economy has quadrupled during the last 25 years.

Due principally to the two drivers of population and economy growth, the global atmosphere is at a critical stage, particularly in relation to climate change.¹ For most of the world, air quality guidelines are not being met as important eco-systems are experiencing pollution loads in excess of critical thresholds. The current trajectory makes it unlikely that goals to mitigate climate change will be reached, and thus efforts to reduce the human health impacts of atmospheric pollutants and achieve human development will be compromised.

Pressure on land resources has increased, and economic growth has come at the expense of natural resources and ecosystems.¹ 60% of the world’s major eco-systems underpinning livelihoods have been degraded or used unsustainably, while per capita consumption continues to rise globally.

Human demands for water are increasing and are already unsustainable in many regions. Increasing water-use efficiency is vital to ensure water resources for all uses. Fresh water and marine eco-systems are critical to human development, and reducing water pollution is imperative to eco-system health and to provide safe water for humans. Against a background of continuing water degradation and overexploitation, the need for sustainable water supplies remains one of humanity’s most critical resource needs.¹

The state of global biodiversity is continuing to decline, with substantial and ongoing losses of populations, species, and habitats, so the benefits humans obtain from biodiversity are at risk.¹ Continuing ecological degradation, unsustainable levels of consumption, and inequities in sharing the benefits from biodiversity threaten the improvements in human well-being and health that have been achieved in recent decades.¹

There is extensive but incomplete scientific knowledge about the impacts of chemicals and wastes on humans and the environment. While chemicals play an important role in human life, economic development, and prosperity, global chemical pollution is a serious threat to sustainable development

1: United Nations Environmental Programme Global Environmental Outlook

and livelihoods. This problem impacts both humanity and eco-systems. For example, more than 90% of fish in one sample are contaminated with pesticides.

The earth is composed of complex, interacting systems. As this brief summary highlights, increasing human pressure on the planet is causing critical thresholds to be exceeded, beyond which abrupt changes to life-support functions of the planet could occur. There is urgent need to address the human pressures on the Earth.

***Resolution for Reference and Counsel, Upstate New York Assembly 2019
Memorial to the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly
Endorsement of "The Earth Charter"***

Explanatory Prologue

The Earth Charter, an international declaration of values and principles that support building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society in the 21st century "seeks to inspire in all peoples a sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well being of the human family, the greater community of life, and future generations."ⁱⁱ The Charter was created by a global consultation process, and it has been endorsed by organizations representing millions of people. It attempts to provide a new framework for thinking about and addressing issues related to environmental protection, human rights, equitable human development, and peace, regarding these issues as interdependent and indivisible.

Whereas it is clear that urgent action is needed to reverse the current course of environmental degradation and becoming a signatory to *The Earth Charter* will re-affirm publicly the commitment of the ELCA to act as stewards of God's creation; and

Whereas our social statement *Church in Society* calls us to support institutions, such as the Earth Charter Initiative, that serve the common good and further calls us to exercise our baptismal vocation to work for freedom, justice, peace, environmental well-being, and good order in public life, becoming a signatory to the Earth Charter will allow new avenues to pursue this vocation. *The Earth Charter* specifically promotes increased freedom, social and economic justice, a culture of peace, and respect and care for the community of life; and

Whereas our social statement *Caring for Health* indicates our enduring commitment to work for and support health care for all people, and it is clear that human health is very much dependent on the health of all creation; these goals are in concord with the Earth Charter call to ensure universal access to health care; and

Whereas our social statement *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All* states that human impoverishment is incompatible with the reign of God and calls for family planning and enhanced opportunities for women, reduction of overwhelming international debt burdens, and respect for the integrity and limits of the earth; and

Whereas these limits are being exceeded, and population growth is a major driver, and *The Earth Charter* specifically calls for support for family planning and greater opportunity for women, the eradication of poverty, and the empowerment of every human being with education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood; and

1: United Nations Environmental Programme Global Environmental Outlook

Whereas our social statement *For Peace in God's World* makes clear that we are all responsible to God for earthly peace, and *The Earth Charter* recognizes that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part; and

Whereas our social statement further states that humans are made for life in community—with God, with others, and with the rest of creation, so these statements are in concord, so that by becoming a signatory to *The Earth Charter*, the ELCA will become an even greater “presence for peace” by working with other signatories to pursue peace; and

Whereas our social statement *Caring for Creation* tells us that we are called to care for the Earth as God cares for the Earth and to advance international acceptance of the principles of participation, solidarity, sufficiency and sustainability in resolving environmental issues; and

Whereas as a signatory to the Earth Charter, we can promote these principles, because *The Earth Charter* aims to bring forth a sustainable global society, the equitable sharing of finite resources and the benefits of development, a shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family and the larger living world, in a spirit of solidarity: therefore

Be it resolved that the Upstate New York Synod memorializes the 2019 Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:

1. To endorse the Earth Charter; and
2. To develop educational materials for all ages about *The Earth Charter* and its relationship to the ELCA's social statements; and
3. To encourage members of the ELCA Congregations to pray for the whole of creation, to respect the rights of all species, to acknowledge the integrity of all elements, and to hold what God has entrusted to this generation in trust for future generations; and
4. To encourage ELCA synods, seminaries, colleges, congregations, members and other entities to join with other endorsers of *The Earth Charter* to promote its precepts and engage in collective action to bring out its aims.

Commented [LM1]:

ⁱAssessment Report: United Nations Environmental Global Environmental Outlook (<https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/global-environmental-outlook>). Many of the details of this *Background Information* are drawn from this source.

ⁱⁱ Earth Charter Initiative: "What is the Earth Charter?" (<http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/What-is-the-Earth-Charter%3F.html>.)