

God's Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and Action
A Pastoral Letter from the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church¹

God's creation is in crisis. We, the bishops of The United Methodist Church, cannot remain silent while God's people and God's planet suffer. This beautiful natural world is a loving gift from God, the Creator of all things seen and unseen. God has entrusted its care to all of us, but we have turned our backs on God and on our responsibilities. Our neglect, selfishness, and pride have fostered:

- pandemic poverty and disease;
 - environmental degradation, and
 - the proliferation of weapons and violence.ⁱ

Despite these interconnected threats to life and hope, God's creative work continues. Despite the ways we all contribute to these problems, God still invites each one of us to participate in the work of renewal. We must begin the work of renewing creation by being renewed in our own hearts and minds. *We cannot help the world until we change our way of being in it.*

In preparation for this letter and the accompanying Foundation Document, we, the bishops, have listened to thousands of United Methodists around the world. You asked us to lead with concrete actions, raise awareness, and offer a word of hope to ease our grief, guilt and concern. Because you informed the substance of this letter, we invite you to participate in its reading by joining in the lament, confession, and pledges in a few moments. The differences among us are great, but we share a common concern and a common call. We all feel saddened by the state of the world, overwhelmed by the scope of these problems, and anxious about the future, but *God calls us and equips us to respond*. No matter how bad things are, God's creative work continues. Christ's resurrection assures us that death and destruction do not have the last word. Paul taught that through Jesus Christ, God offers redemption to all of creation and reconciles all things, "whether on earth or in heaven."^(Col 1:20ⁱⁱ) God's Spirit is always and

¹ The 2004 General Conference of The United Methodist Church called for the Council of Bishops to publish new documents and a study guide similar to the Council's landmark call in 1986, *In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace*. This is the Council's response to the General Conference action (*The Book of Resolutions of*

everywhere at work in the world fighting poverty, restoring health, renewing creation, and reconciling peoples.

Aware of God's vision for creation, we no longer see a list of isolated problems affecting disconnected people, plants, and animals. Rather, we see one interconnected system that "groans in travail." (Romans 8:22) The threats to peace, people, and planet earth are related to one another, and God's vision encompasses complete well-being. We, your bishops, join with many global religious leaders to call for a comprehensive response to these interrelated issues. We urge all United Methodists and people of goodwill to offer themselves as instruments of God's renewing Spirit in the world.

We cannot be instruments of God's renewing Spirit in the world if we continue to deny the wounds of creation. Therefore, *let us join in a lament for God's people and planet:*

Leaderⁱⁱⁱ: We see waters polluted, species destroyed, forests ablaze, and land abused. We see weapons and waste littering the earth. We see people, created in the very image of God, suffering from famine and disease, burying their children, and living in hatred and fear. We know the farmers who cannot plant their fields because they are infested by land mines. We know the nations that build and make plans to use weapons of mass destruction in the vain pursuit of security.

People: We lament the wounds on our beautiful planet.

Leader: We see people overwhelmed by fear and anxiety; people who find the wounds of the world too deep to address; people who see the challenges to health and well-being for all as too great to overcome. We know the workers who can no longer provide for their families and the activists exhausted by the struggle for justice.

People: We grieve for our world, filled with pain.

The United Methodist Church 2004: "Replace In Defense of Creation with new Document and Study Guide").

Leader: We see communities without basic health care and clean water; communities stripped of natural resources and denied access to land; communities torn apart by intolerance, religious extremism and ethnic hatred. We know the refugee who risks death and capture searching for a safe place to live.

People: We weep for communities in crisis.

Leader: We see a world where some live opulently while others barely survive; a world where the innocent suffer and the corrupt profit; a world where too many still find their opportunities and freedom limited by skin color, gender, or birthplace. We know the boy who is caught in the snare of drugs and violence and the girl who is raped or forced into prostitution.

People: We mourn a world of inequality and injustice.

Leader: God sees the creation's wounds. God hears our lament. *And God calls us to accountability.* We cannot be instruments of God's renewal if we deny our complicity in pandemic poverty and disease, environmental degradation, and proliferation of weapons and violence.

Pastor: *We, the bishops of the United Methodist Church, confess our failure to lead our members to care for God's planet and people.* We do not always maintain the bond and balance between personal and social holiness that marks our Wesleyan heritage. We sometimes focus on internal church matters and neglect creation's daunting needs. We allow concerns about agreement and church growth to stifle our prophetic voice. We do not consistently provide the courageous leadership for peace and justice requested by our people. And too often we overlook expertise and gifts for leadership among our people.

We ask now that you join us in common confession, saying together:

All: As United Methodists, we confess our failure to embody the image of God. We rationalize our sin; satisfy our own desires; and exercise our freedom at the expense of the common good. We know that we should live within sustainable boundaries but we struggle to summon the

moral will to change.^{iv} As individuals and communities of faith, we have not been the stewards and caretakers that God created us to be.

Pastor: As your bishops, we encourage you to *find solace and strength in the knowledge that God's creative work continues*. This gracious and loving God still calls us forth and prepares us to care for one another and the planet. With John Wesley, let us all affirm the “unceasing presence of God, the loving, pardoning God, manifested to the heart, and perceived by faith,” and turn to God offering “up all the thoughts of our hearts, all the words of our tongues, and all the works of our hands, all our body, soul, and spirit, to be an holy sacrifice, acceptable unto God in Christ Jesus.”^v We pray for the wisdom and courage to change the ways we live and work, relate to one another and the earth, and allow our nations to be governed. Through God's grace, we renew our minds, reorient our wills, and recommit ourselves to faithful discipleship as instruments of God's renewing Spirit. We rededicate ourselves faithfully to follow the One who came into the world to reconcile us to God and to one another.

In that spirit of rededication, we offer three general recommendations and nine particular pledges.

First, let us orient our lives toward God's holy vision. This vision of the future calls us to hope and to action. “For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”(Jer 29:11) Christ's resurrection assures us that this vision is indeed a *promise* of renewal and reconciliation. As disciples of Christ, we take God's promise as the purpose for our lives. Let us, then, rededicate ourselves to God's holy vision, living each day with awareness of the future God extends to us and of the Spirit that leads us onward.

Second, let us practice social and environmental holiness. We believe personal holiness and social holiness must never be separated. John Wesley preached: “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social. No holiness but social holiness.”^{vi} Through social holiness we make ourselves a channel of God's blessing in the world. Because God's blessing, care, and promise of renewal extend to all of creation, we can speak today of “environmental holiness” as well. We practice social and environmental holiness by caring for God's people and God's planet and by

challenging those whose policies and practices neglect the poor, exploit the weak, hasten global warming, and produce more weapons.

Third, let us live and act in hope. As people in the tradition of John Wesley, we understand reconciliation and renewal to be part of the *process* of salvation that is already underway. We are not hemmed into a fallen world. Rather we are part of a divine unfolding process to which we must contribute. As we faithfully respond to God's grace and call to action, the Holy Spirit guides us in this renewal. With a resurrection spirit, we look forward to the renewal of the whole creation and commit ourselves to that vision. We pray that God will accept and use our lives and resources that we re-dedicate to a ministry of peace, justice and hope to overcome poverty and disease, environmental degradation, and the proliferation of weapons and violence.

With God's help and with you as our witnesses...

1. *We as your bishops pledge to answer God's call to deepen our spiritual consciousness as just stewards of creation.* We commit ourselves to faithful and effective leadership on these issues, in our denomination, and in our communities and nations.
2. *We pledge to make God's vision of renewal our goal.* With every evaluation and decision, we will ask: Does this contribute to God's renewal of creation? Ever aware of the difference between what is and what must be, we pledge to practice Wesleyan "holy dissatisfaction."^{vii}
3. *We pledge to practice dialogue with those whose life experience differs dramatically from our own, and we pledge to practice prayerful self-examination.* For example, in the Council of bishops, the fifty active bishops in the United States are committed to listening and learning with the nineteen active bishops in Africa, Asia and Europe. And the bishops representing the United States' conferences will prayerfully examine the fact that their nation consumes more than its fair share of the world's resources, generates the most waste, and produces the most weapons.
4. *We pledge ourselves to make common cause with religious leaders and people of good will worldwide who share these concerns.* We will to connect and collaborate with ecumenical and interreligious partners and with community and faith organizations so

that we may strengthen our common efforts.

5. *We pledge to advocate for justice and peace in the halls of power in our respective nations and international organizations.*
6. *We pledge to measure the “carbon footprint”^{viii} of our episcopal and denominational offices, determine how to reduce it, and implement those changes. We will urge our congregations, schools and settings of ministry to do the same.*
7. *We pledge, to the best of our ability, to provide the resources needed by our conferences to reduce dramatically our collective exploitation of the planet, peoples and communities, including technical assistance with buildings and programs, education and training, young people’s and online networking resources.*
8. *We pledge to practice hope as we engage and continue supporting the many transforming ministries of our denomination. Every day we will thank God for fruit produced through the work of The United Methodist Church and through each of you.*
9. *We pledge more effective use of the church and community webpages to inspire and share what we learn.^{ix} We celebrate the communications efforts that tell the stories of struggle and transformation within our denomination.*

With these pledges, we respond to God’s gracious invitation to join in the process of renewal. God is already visibly at work in people and groups around the world. We rededicate ourselves to join these movements, the movements of the Spirit. Young people are passionately raising funds to provide mosquito nets for their “siblings” thousands of miles away. Dock workers are refusing to off-load small weapons being smuggled to armed combatants in civil wars in their continent. People of faith are demanding land reform on behalf of landless farm workers. Children and young people have formed church-wide “green teams” to transform our buildings and ministries into testimonies of stewardship and sustainability. Ecumenical and interreligious partners persist in demanding the major nuclear powers to reduce their arsenals, step by verifiable step, making a way to a more secure world totally disarmed of nuclear weapons. God is already doing a new thing. With this Letter and the accompanying Foundation Document, we rededicate ourselves to participate in God’s work, and we urge you all to

rededicate yourselves as well.

We beseech every United Methodist, every congregation and every public leader: “Will you participate in God’s renewing work?” We are filled with hope for what God can accomplish through us, and we pray you respond after each question: “We will, with God’s help!”

Leader: Will you live and act in hope?

People: We will, with God’s help.

Leader: Will you practice social and environmental holiness?

People: We will, with God’s help.

Leader: Will you learn from one another and prayerfully examine your lives?

People: We will, with God’s help.

Leader: Will you order your lives toward God’s holy vision of renewal?

People: We will, with God’s help.

Leader: With God’s good creation imperiled by poverty and disease, environmental degradation, and weapons and violence, will you offer yourselves as instruments of God’s renewing work in the world?

People: We will, with God’s help.

Pastor: May God’s grace purify our reason, strengthen our will, and guide our action. May the love of God, the peace of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit be among you, everywhere and always, so that you may be a blessing to all creation and to all the children of God, making peace, nurturing and practicing hope, choosing life and coming to life eternal. Amen.

ⁱ In 2002, Reverend Dr. William Sloane Coffin, referring to a political trio of threats said, “A more likely and far more dangerous trio would be environmental degradation, pandemic poverty, and a world awash with weapons.” *The Chautauqua Appeal*, with Joan Brown Campbell and Stephen J. Sidorak, Jr.

ⁱⁱ Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references are from the New Revised Standard Version published by the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA.

ⁱⁱⁱ This Lament is offered as a responsive reading. The “pastor” is the voice of the bishops

throughout the letter; the “leader” is another person who directs the lament with the “people” – all those gathered together.

^{iv} From *Hope in God’s Future*, a report of the British Methodist Church Conference on *Christian Discipleship in the Context of Climate Change*, July 2009, Wolverhampton, UK.

^v John Wesley, Sermon 19: “The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God,” *Works* 1:442.

^{vi} Hymns and Sacred Poems, 1739, ¶ 5.

^{vii} ”When... Christian perfection becomes the goal, a fundamental hope is aroused that the future can surpass the present. And a corresponding holy dissatisfaction is aroused with regard to any present state of affairs—a dissatisfaction that supplies the critical edge necessary to keep the process of individual transformation moving. Moreover, this holy dissatisfaction is readily transferable from the realm of the individual to that of society, where it provides a persistent motivation for reform in the light of ‘a more perfect way’ that goes beyond any status quo.” Runyon, Theodore, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 168.

^{viii} A “carbon footprint” is an estimate of how much carbon dioxide (a greenhouse gas) is produced to support life activities including travel and home energy use. Carbon footprints are also applied on a larger scale to companies, businesses, and nations.

^{ix} In support of the many persons who have followed this project of the Council, an interactive multimedia website will have resources, educational materials, downloadable video clips and social networking: www.HopeAndAction.org.