

New Cosmology and the Earth Charter Study Group

Rick Kunkle

For many years I have felt close to the earth through the many outdoor activities I enjoy and my work in the environmental field. I had heard bits and pieces about the New Cosmology, but had never pursued it. In September 2003, I had the opportunity to come to Cahokia Mounds with a small group of CLC members and others to learn more about the New Cosmology. This was a wonderful blessing for me and I am grateful to Pat Carter and Ron and Janet Nimer for organizing our gathering and to our presenters John Surette, S.J., Maurice Lange, OMI, and Lois and Kuruvila Zachariah. In many ways I was able to begin to connect my faith and spirituality with my understanding and experience of creation, enriching both.

One desire from my experience at Cahokia Mounds was to share it with others. This has taken several forms including conversations with friends and focusing on the theme of creation for one of the meetings of my group. During Lent I had the opportunity to join several members of my parish in leading a study and sharing group on the Earth Charter. In this article I would like to share that experience and how we incorporated the New Cosmology and church teaching into our reflection of the Earth Charter.

The purpose of the Earth Charter study group was to share experiences and reflect on the Charter and related Church teaching. The Earth Charter “is a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century.” The invitation to our Earth Charter Gatherings described the Charter as, “a beautiful document - really the first of its kind - for it weaves together the wisdom of the world’s cultures and religious traditions with the insights and understandings that are now coming out of our human, physical and social sciences and offers us a more hopeful way into the future. The Earth Charter invites us to that necessary change of mind and heart that must occur in order to actualize what we Christians call ‘The Reign of God’.”

The drafting of the Earth Charter was part of the unfinished business of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. An Earth Charter Commission was formed in 1997 to oversee the Earth Charter Initiative. The Earth Charter is the product of a decades long, worldwide, cross-cultural conversation about common goals and shared values involving the input of thousands of individuals and hundred of organizations. The Earth Charter was approved in March 2000 and officially launched at the Peace Palace in The Hague on June 29, 2000. One of the goals of the Earth Charter Initiative was to seek endorsement by the United Nations General Assembly in 2002, the tenth anniversary of the Rio Summit. This has not occurred, but the Initiative continues to disseminate the Charter, promote its use as an educational tool, and encourage its endorsement and adoption by groups, businesses and governments.

During the six weeks of the Earth Charter Study Group we considered each of the six parts of the Charter: the Preamble, the four sections of principles, and the concluding section. For each session we developed a relevant theme and incorporated Church teaching and other input (including prayer, video and other resources) into our conversations. The parts of the Earth Charter and themes were as follows:

Preamble: New Cosmology

First Principles - Respect and Care for the Community of Life: Global Warming



Rick Kunkle is currently the Regional Chair for CLC Northwest. He has been involved with CLC since 1990 and is a Diaspora member after his CLC dispersed several years ago. He works for the Washington State University Energy Program evaluating programs that encourage energy efficiency and conducting research on energy use and ways to promote energy-efficient behavior. He is married with two teenage children and lives in Olympia, Washington.

Rick is pictured above sitting on his roof next to his solar panel.



Second Principles - Ecological Integrity: Columbia River Pastoral Letter
Third Principles - Social and Economic Justice: Globalization and Food Production
Fourth Principles: Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace: El Salvador Peace Zones
The Way Forward: Our Response

1. PREAMBLE

The Preamble of the Earth Charter sets the context for the principles that follow. It states that we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. However, our dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental devastation, the depletion of resources and a massive extinction of species. We have a choice — we can risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life or we can decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

We drew on two key concepts from the New Cosmology that tie closely into the foundations of the Earth Charter for our first study session. These are the two fundamental things I took with me from my experience at Cahokia Mounds.

1. God is present in all creation: All creation has its origins in the great cosmic/divine event that initiated our universe 15 billion years ago. All the material and energy that makes up creation came from that event and the divine presence in that event is also present in all creation.
2. Creation is an ongoing process that has been underway for 15 billion years. Our creation story continues and we are participants in the story.

These two concepts provide an important perspective on how we view creation and our role in caring for creation. Pope John Paul II, in his message for the World Day of Peace in 1990 affirms our responsibility for the environment: “Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone... When the ecological crisis is set within the broader context of the search for peace within society, we can understand better the importance of giving attention to what the earth and its atmosphere are telling us: namely that there is an order in the universe which must be respected and that the human person, endowed with the capability of choosing freely, has a grave responsibility to preserve this order for the well being of future generations. I wish to repeat that the ecological crisis is a moral issue.” This statement is very much in line with the ideas in the Preamble for the Earth Charter as is the more recent Pastoral Letter on the Ecology from the Canadian Bishops.

2. FIRST PRINCIPLES - RESPECT AND CARE FOR THE COMMUNITY OF LIFE: GLOBAL WARMING

The first set of principles in the Earth Charter outlines four broad commitments that are further developed in the rest of the charter:

1. Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.
2. Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.
3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.
4. Secure Earth’s bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

Global warming relates to these principles because it threatens the earth, the community of life, the functioning of society and present and future generations. In our study group we talked about global warming and its implications in the Northwest and we considered the U.S. Catholic Bishops letter on global warming.

The concept of global warming is fairly easy to understand. The earth’s atmosphere acts like a greenhouse, trapping some of the energy from the sun. Without the presence of heat-trapping greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (such as carbon dioxide), the earth

Questions for Discussion

1. *What conscious choices are you making (personally and communally) to be ‘stewards of creation’ as presented in the U.S. Catholic Bishops 2001 letter?*
2. *Has the author’s example of parish action (to purchase fair trade coffee) inspired you to initiate a local program that might also further economic justice?*
3. *“As individuals we can continue to educate ourselves, help inform others, live more simply, reduce our energy use and, when possible, spend our money at businesses that operate in just and sustainable ways.”*

Would you be able to separate and rank these five points in the order of their importance to you: ideally, pragmatically; personally?

would be very cold and uninhabitable. However, the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is growing rapidly and there is clear evidence that global temperatures are getting warmer. Human activities, in particular the consumption of fossil fuel energy (oil, natural gas and coal), are driving the increase in greenhouse gases beyond natural levels. The United Nations-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded in its second state-of-the-science report in 1995 that evidence showed “a discernable human influence on global climate” and recent research has reinforced this conclusion.

The impacts of global warming on the earth’s climate are complicated and uncertain and will vary throughout the globe. Weather patterns and storms are expected to be more severe and the equatorial regions of the earth will likely become hotter and dryer. Sea level will rise, flooding low-lands. In the Northwest, where I live, we can expect more winter and spring flooding due to warmer, wetter winters. Dryer summers will lead to more forest fires. Perhaps most significantly, mountain snow packs will be much less, reducing summer river flows, which will decrease the amount of water available for irrigation, hydro-electricity generation, and salmon.

The U.S Catholic Bishops wrote a pastoral letter on global climate change in 2001. In the introduction they state, “At its core, global climate change is not about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest group pressures. It is about the future of God’s creation and the one human family.”

The Bishops state that the virtue of prudence demands that we respond to global climate change. They indicate that, “if enough evidence indicates that the present course of action could jeopardize humankind’s well-being (even in the face of uncertainty), prudence dictates taking mitigating or preventative action.”

The Bishops pose two central moral questions:

1. How are we to fulfill God’s call to be stewards of creation in an age when we may have the capacity to alter that creation significantly and perhaps irrevocably?
2. How can we as a “family of nations” exercise stewardship in a way that respects and protects the integrity of God’s creation and provides for the common good, as well as for economic and social progress based on justice?

They draw on the following topics to address these questions: the universal common good; stewardship of God’s creation and the right to economic initiative and private property; protecting the environment for future

generations; population and authentic development; and caring for the poor and issues of equity.

The Bishops emphasize the importance of focusing on the needs of the poor, the weak and the vulnerable in a debate often dominated by more powerful interests. In particular, they remind us that the nations and industrial economies most responsible for the production of greenhouse gases also have the greatest capacity to respond. Each of us can also respond to global warming since the primary source of greenhouse gases is energy consumption. By reducing energy consumption in our homes, from our travel, and from the products we buy we can help reduce the production of greenhouse gases and set an example for others.

3. SECOND PRINCIPLES - ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY: COLUMBIA RIVER PASTORAL LETTER

The second set of Earth Charter principles state that we should protect and restore the integrity of the Earth’s ecological systems; prevent further harm; adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard the Earth’s regenerative capacities; and advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote its application. The intent of the Columbia River Pastoral Letter fits within this framework. The Columbia River Pastoral Letter Project was launched by the twelve Northwest and Canadian Bishops and culminated with the release in 2001 of the Pastoral Letter, “The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good”. The Bishops addressed the letter to the Catholic community and to all people of good will with the “hope that we might work together to develop and implement an integrated spiritual, social and ecological vision for our watershed home, a vision that promotes justice for people and stewardship of creation”.

The Columbia River begins in British Columbia in Canada, is fed in the U.S. by tributaries in Montana, Idaho, Washington and Oregon and flows to the Pacific Ocean, where it completes its 1,200 mile journey. This magnificent network of rivers — the region’s lifeblood — is an extensive ecosystem covering 259,000 square miles that transcends national, state and provincial borders.

In the pastoral letter the bishops explore themes that are consistent with our Christian belief that the earth is a creation of God intended to serve the needs of all creation. They suggest that caring for the watershed requires entering into a gradual process of conversion and change.

The pastoral letter consists of four parts: Rivers of Our Moment; Rivers through Our Memory; Rivers in Our Vision; and Rivers as Our Responsibility. The first three parts share history, current conditions, hopes, regional and

religious traditions, and spiritual, social and ecological vision. The last section outlines ten considerations for caring for the watershed:

1. Consider the common good
2. Conserve the watershed as a common good
3. Conserve and protect species and wildlife
4. Respect the dignity and traditions of the region's indigenous people
5. Promote justice for the poor, linking economic justice and environmental justice
6. Promote community resolution of economic and ecological issues
7. Promote social and ecological responsibility among reductive and reproductive enterprises
8. Conserve energy and establish environmentally integrated alternative energy sources
9. Respect ethnic and racial cultures, citizens, and communities
10. Integrate transportation and recreation needs with sustainable ecosystem requirements

The pastoral letter reflects the ideals of the Northwest and our Catholic tradition. It is difficult to gauge whether it has had much impact in the region, but it introduces a spiritual dimension that is often lacking in discussions on a variety of issues associated with the River.

4. THIRD PRINCIPLES - SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE: GLOBALIZATION AND FOOD PRODUCTION

The third set of Earth Charter principles address social and economic justice. They promote — eradicating poverty, human development in an equitable and sustainable manner, gender equality and equity, and the right of all to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being. In our discussion of these principles we considered globalization. Globalization is a complex issue that has significant social, economic and environmental impacts. At a basic level, globalization refers to the rise of a global economy through a process of denationalizing markets, politics and legal systems. Some see this as positive, while others view it negatively. In our discussion, we saw globalization in its present form spreading an industrial/capitalist model for the world economy, production and consumption. A fundamental question to consider is whether the industrial/capitalist model is what we want to define our world vision or whether there are other principles and values, such as those expressed in the Earth Charter or Catholic teaching, which better describe a just and equitable world vision?

We considered food production as an example. Farms are becoming larger and more resource intensive. Food production and processing is becoming an industrial process that is controlled by a more and more concentrated set of

industries. The ideal of modern agri-business is to efficiently meet the food needs of the world. Yet starvation in the world is a political and social problem, not a production problem. Many countries in the south are agrarian societies. Farmers that are displaced or cannot compete with larger farms lose their livelihoods. Global markets that lead to very low prices can mean that some farmers cannot earn enough from their crops to earn a living wage. This can destroy local economies. People cannot earn a living, they cannot buy food, and food is not being grown locally to meet their needs.

However, there are examples that provide an alternative. Our parish recently started purchasing fair trade coffee. Low coffee prices have meant that many small farmers in coffee growing regions of the world can no longer earn a living. Fair trade coffee costs a little more, but it allows those producing it to earn a living wage. There are also similar examples of micro-enterprise development in developing countries. In the Northwest there has been a surge in local organic farms and community supported agriculture. These farms can claim to be more efficient than large, industrialized farms in terms of their output relative to the resources they consume. By supporting them, we support sustainable means of food production.

5. FOURTH PRINCIPLES - DEMOCRACY, NONVIOLENCE, AND PEACE: EL SALVADOR PEACE ZONES

The fourth set of Earth Charter Principles aims to strengthen democracy; promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence and peace; integrate knowledge, values and skills for a sustainable way of life into formal education and life-long learning; and encourage respect for all living beings. El Salvador is a country that has suffered from violence, war, political instability, intervention from outside powers and environmental destruction. However, there are hopeful signs as we learned from a member of our study group who has spent time in El Salvador and works with organizations promoting non-violence and self-sufficiency, such as the Foundation for Self-Sufficiency in Central America.

The Foundation has been promoting a culture of peace since its inception, particularly through the Local Zone of Peace Project. By providing education, promoting dialogue, working with local community groups and helping communities to organize, community members are better equipped to promote peace in their communities. They see themselves as instruments of change with the ability to transform conflict and heal relationships. The member of our study group said that during the period he has visited El Salvador, the level of violence has decreased. The Foundation is working on a number of other projects including youth gang mediation and youth projects, organic farming, a

chicken project, efficient wood-burning stoves, mangrove restoration, reforestation and self-composting toilets. They are starting a new project, the Mesoamerica Peace Project to bring people from different cultures and religions together to build a culture, spirituality and theology of peace. This is one example of how the principles of the Earth Charter can become reality. There are other organizations doing similar work throughout the world.

6. THE WAY FORWARD: OUR RESPONSE

The Earth Charter concludes with the statement: “Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace and the joyful celebration of life.” Each of us can contribute to achieving this vision. Our study group thought about ways we can do this within our church through education and by encouraging our church to use energy wisely and purchase products that are produced in ways that reflect our values. As individuals we can continue to educate ourselves, help inform others, live more simply, reduce our energy use and, when possible, spend our money at businesses that operate in just and sustainable ways.

CLOSING PRAYER

We join with the Earth and with each other.
To bring new life to the land
To restore the waters
To refresh the air

We join with the Earth and with each other.
To renew the forests
To care for the plants
To protect the creatures

We join with the Earth and with each other.
To celebrate the seas
To rejoice in the sunlight
To sing the song of the stars

We join with the Earth and with each other.
To recreate the human community
To promote justice and peace
To remember our children

We join with the Earth and with each other.

We join together as many and diverse expressions of one loving mystery: for the healing of the earth and the renewal of life.

U.N. Environmental Sabbath Program from Earth Prayers, edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, Harper San Francisco, 1991

RESOURCES

Earth Charter

<http://www.earthcharterusa.org>

“Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all Creation”—
World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990 - Pope John Paul II
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace_en.html

Pastoral Letter on the Christian Ecological Imperative -
Canadian Bishops

[http://www.cccb.ca/
PublicStatements.htm?CD=392&ID=1400](http://www.cccb.ca/PublicStatements.htm?CD=392&ID=1400)

Columbia River Pastoral Letter

<http://www.columbiariver.org/index1.html>

“Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence,
and the Common Good”

US Conference of Catholic Bishops

<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/globalclimate.htm>

Interfaith Climate Change Network:

<http://www.protectingcreation.org/>

Climate Solutions

<http://www.climatesolutions.org>

Interfaith Fair Trade Initiative

<http://www.lwr.org/fairtrade/ifti/>

Community Supported Agriculture

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa/>

Foundation for Self-Sufficiency in Central America

<http://www.fssca.net>

Earth Ministry

<http://www.earthministry.org/>

Pax Christi

<http://www.paxchristiusa.org>

Northwest Earth Institute

<http://www.nwei.org>

Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center

<http://www.ipjc.org>