

## Faith Statement

International Climate Stewardship Solutions Conference

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Yesterday I had been asked to preach at the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the United Methodist Church in Bowman, ND. I live in Mitchell, South Dakota, so on Saturday I drove there by way of Rapid City, north along Highway 85, which skims the edge of Custer National Forest. I find that entire Highway 85 drive absolutely breath-taking. I hope you all have the opportunity to make that drive sometime. It is magnificent! The grasslands – the buttes – the windswept prairies – the high plains. I stand in awe of that place and I am humbled by the vastness and miracle of God's Creation.

And I am reminded of the words of Genesis:

**“And God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good.”** Genesis 1:31

Every once in a while I get asked why I choose to be involved in an organization like the Prairie Stewardship Network – or sometimes, as President of the General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church (which deals with many social issues of the day), I will get e-mails or letters from faithful church members who are unhappy that the church takes a stand on such issues as climate change or environmental stewardship or environmental justice.

And I must confess that I am puzzled why that is even a question at all, because for me, as a person of faith, it seems so very clear.

So today I am pleased to share with you a brief explanation as to why I believe the issue of Creation Care is – and ought to be – an important issue for people of faith.

My reasons are threefold: theological, moral, and personal.

### Theologically

The Biblical story is basically a story about relationship - the relationship between God, human beings and Creation.

In Genesis God gives Adam and Eve dominion over the earth and all that is in it. The word '**dominion**' is a trouble-some word. It has often been used to justify the abuse or misuse of Creation - and the definition for '**dominion**' does mean to '**rule**' or '**control**'. However, that concept must be taken within the context of the overall covenant relationship – between God and humanity, between humanity and Creation, and between God and Creation – a relationship which is at the very heart of our faith.

When seen within that covenant, '**dominion**' implies an obligation and a responsibility. As human beings, we have an obligation to care for this creation in the same way that God cares for us, as we are part of God's own creation.

Listen to the words from Psalm 24:

**“The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.”**

Again and again throughout scripture we are reminded that all we have belongs to God – not to us. And part of our job is to care for the Earth as God cares for it. In fact, according to theologian Walter Brueggemann, the ancient Israelites believed that the land belongs to God and God alone. The land represents the promise of God's favor – something that could be used, but not owned.

Listen to the words of Old Testament book of Leviticus:

**“The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.”**  
(Lev. 25:23-24)

Everything is God's. We are simply stewards of this creation.

A steward is a person given responsibility for what belongs to another. The Greek word is *oikonomos*. The word *oikos*, meaning household, is used to describe the world as God's household. Christians, then, are to be stewards of the whole household of God. *Oikonomia*, “Stewardship”, is also the root of our “economics.” *Oikos*, moreover, is the root of our modern word, “ecology.” Thus in a broad sense, stewardship, economics, and ecology are, and should be related.

So, being created in God's image brings with it the responsibility to care for God's creation. God chose to give human beings a divine image not so we would exploit creation to our own ends, but so we would be recognized as stewards of God. It is a trusteeship – not an ownership. It is a sacred trust.

For over a hundred years, The United Methodist Church has included in its Book of Discipline, a document entitled the Social Principles, which are not part of church law, but are intended to be instructive and persuasive. I am sure many, if not most, other denominations and faith communities have adopted similar statements.

But let me read just the very first few lines of the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church – the opening lines which lay the foundation for everything that follows:

*“All Creation is the Lord's, and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it. ... God has granted us stewardship of Creation. We should meet these stewardship duties through acts of loving care and respect ... Therefore let us recognize the responsibility of the church and its members to place a high priority on changes in economic, political, social, and technological lifestyle to support a more ecologically equitable and sustainable world leading to a higher quality of life for all of God's creation.”*

I go back to the words of the Psalmist:

**“The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it.”**

For me, theologically, it's that basic – and that simple.

But that leads to the second reason why people of faith need to be involved in the issue of Creation Care. And that is a Moral reason.

In addition to our responsibility to care for the earth and all that is within it, we are given an equally strong mandate to care for those who live within this creation – particularly the most vulnerable of our world ... the children, the poor, the widow, the oppressed.

It is based on the foundational belief that all people are beloved children of God,

All are our brothers and sisters,

all deserve to be cared for with proper food, clean air and water, safe shelters,  
and all need to be treated with love and respect.

When you have populations in such places as Haiti or Africa or anywhere where people are barely surviving, it takes very little for those vulnerable people to be placed in even more jeopardy. Changes in the climate – lack of water – lack of natural resources for energy – anything that may seem small to us, can tip the balance and bring on the threat of annihilation.

When we disregard and abuse God's Creation,

when we live in such a way that we consume more than our share of resources,

when changes in the climate raise air and water temperatures and destroy natural habitats,  
we are putting in even greater jeopardy those who are already most at risk.

And that goes against everything I believe.

Matthew 25 is a guiding principle for me. Jesus says:

**“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me...”**

It is our moral and ethical responsibility to treat our neighbors – whether next door or around the world – as we ourselves would like to be treated. We are a global community, and what I do affects you – and what you do affects me – and together what we do impacts people we will never know.

As people of faith, we must do all we can to close rather than widen the gap between the wealthy and poor. We must find ways to distribute fairly the resources of God's Creation. And we must give priority to meeting basic human needs such as clean air, and water, sufficient food, clothing and shelter.

For,

**“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me...”**

And thirdly – and finally – I have a very Personal reason for caring about what happens to this earth – and our need for a sustainable future.

[Show pictures of Joel and Aaron]

These are my sons, and it is for them that I must live and act in such a way that I leave a legacy of a clean, safe, and sustainable world for them ... and their children ... and their children's children. That is my responsibility – as a person of faith, and as a parent. And I must do all I can to leave to future generations the world as God envisions it – a world of '*shalom*'.

In the words of Leviticus:

**“If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing;**

**you shall eat your bread to full, and live securely in your land. And I will grant peace in the land.**  
(Lev. 26:3-6a)

I believe that the intention of Creation was that all would experience '*shalom*' – that all would know the goodness of that Creation and could experience the fullness of life.

I believe that is God's intention – and it should be ours as well.

So why do I take time away from a busy and over-full schedule to lend my support to this conference and its objectives?

It's simple - because theologically, morally, and personally I can do no other.

Shalom.