

# God, Creation and Climate Change

**A resource for reflection and discussion**

**The Lutheran World Federation  
– A Communion of Churches  
Geneva, 2009**



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The Lutheran World Federation  
-- A Communion of Churches

Department for Theology and Studies

**Geneva, 2009**

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Lutheran World Federation

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# Contents

<b>I. What is going on? .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>II. God and climate change? .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>III. The Triune God is intimately related with all of creation .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>IV. So what about human beings?.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>V. The redemption of all creation.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Notes .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Appendix .....</b>	<b>43</b>



*Crashing waves at Spoon Bay, New South Wales,  
Australia. ©flickr/brentbat / Brent Pearson*

## Preface

This resource is part of the Lutheran World Federation’s overall strategy on the challenges posed by what today is referred to as “climate change.”

Many LWF member churches are deeply affected by and increasingly active in addressing this concern and there is a growing public awareness of the ethical challenges posed by climate change. Ecumenical, interfaith and civil society collaboration is crucial in the efforts being made to seek changes in local, national and global practices.

Yet, climate change is more than just a secular environmental issue; it is an urgent challenge that goes to the core of our faith and spirituality and how this is reflected in the ways we view the world and in what we do. Climate change is moving us to reconsider and revise what we have previously assumed or believed. In that sense, it is changing theology—how we have thought about God and the rest of creation especially in the modern era.

In 2008, a survey was sent out asking people in different local settings what they see, feel and believe in the face of changes that, at least in part, are due to climate change (see appendix). This resource was written in light of responses to the survey, some of which are quoted here. The changes people are experiencing often raise questions or assumptions that are deeply theological and need to be addressed in these terms. This is the main purpose of this resource.

A book of more in-depth biblical, theological and ethical articles, will be published to accompany and examine more extensively

what is set forth here in an only summary fashion. *God, Creation and Climate Change*, vol. 5 in the Theology in the Life of the Church series will be published later in 2009. To order this book, please contact **liesch@lutheranworld.org**.

The LWF is also addressing this challenge through concrete actions in its field programs in many of the most vulnerable parts of the world. Climate change has been a focus of LWF youth (see *A Toolkit on Climate Change*, from **lwfyouth@lutheranworld.org**) and in advocacy based on positions adopted, e.g., by the LWF council. Other events focusing on this will also take place prior to and culminate at the 2010 LWF Assembly in Stuttgart.

We look forward to your responses.

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*This publication can also be downloaded and printed from the Department for Theology and Studies Church and Social Issues web pages on **www.lutheranworld.org**. Translation in other languages will also be posted there.*





## I. What is going on?

Around the world we are experiencing the effects of climate change: water and air temperatures are rising at alarming rates, adversely affecting the habitats that sustain life for fish, animals, plants and human beings. Devastation caused by more severe droughts and floods is increasing. Storms and hurricanes are becoming more frequent and intense. New diseases are appearing and old ones are spreading. For example, because of warmer temperatures the breeding of malaria-carrying mosquitoes has increased. In overly industrialized areas, the air quality is deteriorating. Climate conditions are affecting people's health and in some areas heat-related deaths are on the increase.<sup>1</sup> Hunger is predicted to escalate as the climate changes.

The predictable, dependable order of things is changing: when winter or summer begins, or when the rainy season comes, if at all, is becoming ever more unpredictable. The availability of clean water to sustain life is jeopardized, especially as much of it is being privatized. Houses built on

"What are local people noticing? Rainfalls are erratic and there is less rain each year. Streams and rivers are drying up, and many areas lack water. Lower crop yields have led to higher food prices and, consequently, malnutrition. Malaria and other diseases are increasing. People fight over fertile lands where there is water, resulting in conflicts." (Zambia)

"There is either too much sun or too much rain. The land, the plants, the air, the animals and human beings are suffering. Animals do not procreate as they did in the past. Skin diseases have become more prevalent." (Tanzania)

**What are some of the effects of climate change in your context?**

what seemed to be solid ground are suddenly swept into raging waters. Growing seasons for crops are changing significantly, as is the yield of crops related to soil quality, moisture and erosion. In some places, winters are becoming colder, and in others, warmer. Where the food needed for daily life will come from, and when, is becoming more unpredictable, making the right to food more precarious, especially for the most vulnerable.

“We used to plow our land starting in March but now, unless it rains, the soil is too hard to plow. In the past, the seeds stayed in the soil until the rain started but now they die before the rain comes. We get less milk from our cows and goats because of the scarcity of fodder. We used to get wild fruits from the trees but now the few trees remaining do not bear fruit. Our parents and grandparents used to consume milk, butter, honey, different fruits and vegetables but not today.” (Eritrea)

Some are wondering whether they can still rely on God’s promise to Noah: “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease” (Gen 8:22).

As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded in 2007:

Human beings are exposed to climate change through changing weather patterns (for example, more intense and frequent extreme events) and indirectly through changes in water, air, food quality and quantity, ecosystems, agriculture, and economy... Increased frequency of heat stress, droughts and floods negatively affect crop yields and livestock beyond the impacts of mean climate change, creating the possibility for surprises,

“In a river system that covers a large part of Australia, not one drop of water from this system has reached the ocean in the past ten years, due to droughts caused in part by global warming.” (Australia)

with impacts that are larger, and occurring earlier, than predicted using changes in mean variables alone. This is especially the case for subsistence sectors at low latitudes. Climate variability and change also modify the risks of fires, pest and pathogen outbreak, negatively affecting food, fiber and forestry.

“Our barrier island is eroding and we will be forced to relocate our Eskimo village if the trend continues. The local people depend on traditional subsistence hunting and fishing, such that a forced relocation will be very difficult for them.” (Alaska, USA)

In other words, the predictabilities on which we have depended for life as human beings have long known it are changing dramatically. We wonder on what we can depend for the future.

As numerous studies have indicated, it is especially human activity that is causing or at least significantly contributing to climate change. Nevertheless, for people in many parts of the world for whom there is a close relationship between the divine and what occurs through nature, the “God questions” cannot be ignored.

“Repeated monsoons flood the land for long periods, and the sea level is rising. In coastal areas, salt water from the sea is intruding into the drinking water. The over-cultivation of the land and the use of pesticides are degrading the quality of the land. The topography of the land is changing dramatically, and the biodiversity of plants, fish and animals is threatened.” (Bangladesh)



*Korat, Thailand, 17 March 2005 -- Waters have dried up due to prolonged drought, allowing villagers to camp inside the dam to catch the remaining fish. © Greenpeace/Sataporn Thongma*

## II. God and climate change?

Some people view climate change as if God had disappeared from the scene, had been pushed to the margins by human activity and was no longer active in the cosmos. But for persons of faith, the extensive global and cosmic realities of climate change need to be considered in light of how we understand God, creation and humanity.

“God has moved away from destructive human beings, leaving them to perish in their own folly.” (A young woman in Tanzania)

In many passages of the Bible, natural occurrences such as those occurring today due to human-induced climate change, were attributed to God. People in many parts of the world still do so today. God has been considered the agent causing floods, storms, droughts and other local and global “natural” catastrophes. People view what is occurring as being acts of God, and ask why.

“In a world progressively endangered by deforestation, desertification, global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, dangerous carbon emission, greenhouse gas effect and multiple forms of ecological degradation, African spirituality...is a spirituality of balance, harmony, and wholeness, sustained by an active faith in creation as God’s gift.”<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the ages and from different faith perspectives, weather related disasters have often been considered as “acts of God.” When the destructive effects of climate change occur, some immediately respond that God must be punishing human beings—and this is how they

One African woman ponders, "Where is God in all of this suffering? Are we cursed? Is God punishing us?" Another responds, "I have problems placing this all on God! We as human beings are responsible for disturbing what God has given in nature."

"It's not divine punishment, but it is the logic of consequences, the fact that in this physical universe that God has created, with this wonderful atmosphere, certain actions cause other things to happen. That's the physics of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that trap heat. You cannot keep increasing carbon without warming the planet." (USA)

interpret certain biblical passages. People are told simply to wait and endure God's judgment, rather than doing anything to change what is considered to be God ordained and thus, inevitable.

As people of faith, we maintain that somehow God is involved in climate change—especially to wake us up to the urgency of what is occurring—but we cannot attribute climate change only to "acts of God." We must also turn to science, through which we learn more deeply, and with greater awe, about what God has created.

Many of the problems associated with climate change have arisen because of how human beings have misused that which God has created for the benefit of all creatures. The church has long taught that we are to be good stewards or caretakers of what God has given, and must continue to do so. But the challenge goes deeper than this.

To a large extent, many global facets of the climate change crisis have come about because of how inter-related assumptions about God, creation and human beings have profoundly influenced and shaped modern societies, institutions and ways of life. These have been passed on through centuries of teachings in

the church, which for example, separated nature from grace. Western thinking which tended to separate human beings from the rest of creation contributed to the rise of industrialization and capitalism. Developments such as these, in turn, have spread throughout the world. Over the centuries, these assumptions, and the practices based on them, have contributed cumulatively and now disastrously to climate change, which seriously threatens the future of life on the planet as we have known it. The effect of climate change is like that of hunger—it weakens, gnaws and although it may not be the sole cause of death, it pushes you in that direction.

“Why are the changes happening? Because of human greed, carelessness and selfishness.”  
(Tanzania)

These assumptions include,

- That God is transcendent, unchanging, all powerful, a heavenly monarch or patriarch ruling above and controlling the world, untouched by earthly realities
- A worldview with God at the top, then men over women, children, animals and, at the bottom, the rest of creation
- That as agents of God, human beings are to use or exert power over the rest of creation

**What language, images or teachings have you heard in church that reflect these assumptions?**

“We need new ways of thinking and behaving, new ways of perceiving reality. Today’s capitalism does not have a future. We must construct a sustainable economic system. Maybe it looks like utopia. But there is no future without God’s help. God can do miracles—even change human hearts.” (Czech Republic)

“For most Aboriginal peoples in Australia, the Rainbow Spirit emerges from the land and returns to the land where its power is eternally present. This Spirit is always as close as the land, leaving prints on the land as reminders of its promise to return from the land. In contrast, Christian missionaries presented God dwelling at a distance from the land, ‘in heaven.’” (Australia)

- That God acts primarily in history and not also in and through nature
- That only human beings, and specifically Christians, benefit from God’s grace or redemption
- That spiritual matters are separate from what is embodied or “of this earth.”

The influence and effects of assumptions such as these have spread over the entire world through colonization, conquest, empire building, missionary movements and economic development. This continues today through accelerated processes of globalization. These assumptions have undergirded and furthered habits and practices around the world that we now realize have, over time, contributed dramatically to climate change and are threatening life as we have known it.

Such practices include,

- Economic life based on endless quests for ever greater growth and profit driven by greed, which the global economic crisis is starkly exposing today
- Increasing dependence on fossil fuel extraction to further this development



- Conquering practices of colonization and empire, especially in the constant quest for more resources and markets
- Patriarchal ideologies that perpetuate control over and oppression of both women and the earth
- Discrimination against all those seen as “other” because of their gender, race, ethnicity, caste, economic or political status
- Assuming that some aspects of creation (such as trees, water or air) are dispensable, rather than respecting and valuing all of creation
- An anthropocentrism that tends to value only that which serves human ends.

“Nature was created to distribute well-being, not to be transformed into a mere source of profit, not to swap the green of the forest for the green of the dollar.” (Peru)

“Traditional Sri Lankan society has been strongly influenced by Buddhism and lived in harmony with nature... . It was the Western materialistic consumerist strategy, considered the essence of development, which shattered the foundation of sustainable living that is basic to our cultures.” (Sri Lanka)

Climate change is provoking the need for climatic changes in some faith understandings that have long been taken for granted. Climate change may literally be melting icebergs but it also exposes metaphorical “icebergs” of how God, human beings and the rest of creation have been conceptualized in ways that contribute to the destruction and injustices that have escalated under the currently reigning regime of climate change.

**Assumptions and practices such as those cited here need to be challenged. Instead, we need to consider how God, creation and humanity are interrelated. How might we draw upon what other faiths and local traditions have long assumed and practiced?**



*Goro JCDP, Dadymus, Ethiopia, March 2008. Nothing but dust. Animal going to and from the water-point. © Magnus Aronson/IKON*

### **III. The Triune God is intimately related with all of creation**

When people think about “God” they often refer to a supreme being who reigns over and above the world as an almighty ruler or monarch (almost always as “he”). When something goes wrong in nature, such as occurs under climate change, it is then immediately assumed that this is caused by “God”—as an almighty actor standing outside of and controlling all that occurs on earth. Throughout the ages, and in many religious traditions, humans have prayed and offered sacrifices so that God would bestow favorable conditions for growing crops, protect from storms and rising waters, and control the natural forces of the environment. After all, isn’t God the power over all the cosmos, and thus the One able to control everything, including climate change?

Many biblical references seem to reflect such understandings of God. These are often interpreted in ways that make too sharp a separation between God and nature. In part, this was to distinguish ancient Israel’s understanding of God from some of the

“God, why don’t you intervene? Why do you allow such destructive climate changes to persist?”

“God, why don’t you care a bit more about what you have created?”

“The brokenness of earth is the brokenness of God’s home.”<sup>3</sup>

nature religions, according to which the fate of humans was determined by the gods acting in the cycles and forces of nature. But, making a sharp separation between God and nature becomes a problem when it overlooks the intimate relationship that God has with all of creation, as described in the beginning of Genesis and in many other places in the Bible.

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole Earth is full of his glory” (Isa 6:3) The glory here is the vibrant presence of God, which was earlier depicted as the fire cloud of God’s presence at Sinai. Later it “filled” the tabernacle and then the temple of Solomon. But here Isaiah goes further and declares that God’s very presence fills the whole earth, which is God’s sanctuary.

The God revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures is not unchanging in the same way as are some other gods. God is related to creation and history not by being immune to space and time but by keeping promises. “God’s will” should not simply be equated with natural occurrences, insisting that God is causing all that occurs. Yet, at the same time, we may glimpse what God has created and intends, which contrasts with the breakdown or destruction of

the fragility of creation that is occurring through climate change. Creation is good because God created all that is, although not everything that occurs in creation is good.

In the Book of Job, when Job reaches the depths of despair he not only accuses God of harassing humans unjustly, but also indicts God for God's rough treatment of creation. Job claims that God uses divine wisdom to hold back the waters until they dry up and to loosen them so they flood the land (Job 12:15). In chapters 38-39, God takes Job on a tour of the various aspects of the cosmos to enlighten him about the mysterious "ways" of the natural world. It is not for Job to try to rule nature, but to explore how God has created all that exists and to discover how humans fit into this mysteriously complex design of God.

"Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ... [W]ho shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb? ... [Who] said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped?'" (Job 38:1, 8, 11).

Here and elsewhere in Scripture, we begin to catch a new sense of who God is—not an all-controlling monarch who punishes even the innocent, but God revealed yet hidden throughout creation. God's grace and love are ultimately more crucial than might and power. God is intimately related with humans and the rest of creation, present in the midst of vulnerability and suffering.

“Does the snow of Lebanon leave the crags of Sirion? Do the mountain waters run dry, the cold flowing streams? But my people have forgotten me” (Jer 18:14-15a).

Today, a similar shift is called for in how we imagine or think of God, standing as we do in the midst of a creation suffering the effects of climate change. Those who have used little of the earth’s resources find themselves the most dramatically affected. Yet, blaming God for this is not the answer. As Scripture continually reminds us, human unfaithfulness to God is the problem. This is reflected in the unjust treatment of humans and the rest of creation.

“Creation is the theater of God’s grace.”<sup>5</sup>

The twentieth-century Lutheran ecological theologian, Joseph Sittler, insisted that nature comes from God, cannot be apart from God, and is capable of bearing the glory of God.<sup>4</sup> Grace is the fundamental reality of God, as Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Grace is the sheer givenness of life, the world and ourselves. We are “justified” by grace even in our relation to the things of nature. Condemnation (the opposite of justification) is present in the absence of a gracious regard for nature, such as when we pollute or use nature as a dump.

This concurs with Martin Luther’s sixteenth-century perspective: all of creation is the abode of God. Rather than removed or set over creation, God is in, with and under all that is creaturely. Despite all the nega-

tivities—such as the disruption and destruction occurring due to climate change—we still trust that God is at work in this world, often hidden beneath its opposite.

“The awesome secret of creation is the indwelling of God within it.”<sup>6</sup>

This is also at the heart of what Luther meant by a theology of the cross: God is neither to be seen nor sought behind creation nor inferred from it, but only recognized in and through it. The cross reveals how radically God is immanent in creation.

“Through the theology of the cross the suffering in and of the world is recognized as the locus of God’s creative work.”<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the history of the church, there have been many debates as to what is most central about God. For some, God’s almighty power has been key, while for others it is God’s everlasting love. For Lutherans and many other Christians, what is most important is that God is love. God seeks to be in intimate relation with what God has created, including human beings: being *with* rather than being *above* or distant from creation.

**Why have some sought to separate God from creation, as if God needed to be protected in this way?**

It is the Spirit of God (*ruach*) who conveys this sense of intimacy between God and creation. God is alive and active as the Spirit, giving life to all that is. God’s “breath” expresses God’s life-creating, life-preserving goodness.

The Psalmist praises God: “you ride on the wings of the wind ... you make springs gush forth in the valleys ... you cause the grass to grow for the cattle ... when you send forth your spirit (or breath) they are created; and you renew the face of the ground” (Ps 104:3, 10, 14, 30).

The Spirit of God is the inexhaustible, ever-creative power of God, the

“Praise the Spirit in creation,  
breath of God, life’s origin:

Spirit, moving on the waters,  
quick’ning worlds to life  
within,

Source of breath to all things  
breathing, life in whom all  
lives begin.”<sup>8</sup>

“The crass version of divine transcendence that increasingly characterized classical theism, and locked into place in the Reformation, produced the fantasy of a God ‘outside’ the world... and the presumption of divine omnipotence. This version of divinity as separation purports to honor the transcendence of God, but in fact it is far more preoccupied with our own human honors... Too much of Christianity has disguised greed for the rewards of private immortality as praise of the Creator as though the higher we lift God, the higher we too shall soar.”<sup>10</sup>

life-bestowing force of creation and re-creation, ruling not by controlling power but through powerlessness. God overturns our human notions of power. God’s transforming activity goes beyond any human-erected boundaries, and cannot be limited by dominant values and systems, such as those that have contributed to climate change. The Spirit of God helps human beings to perceive God in the midst of creation.<sup>9</sup> God rules through seeming powerlessness.

In its confession of faith in the Triune God, the church has insisted that God is essentially relational, not an autonomous God but God-in-communion. This is in sharp distinction to views that consider God to be a being who is self-sufficient and separate from creation, controlling it from “outside” or “above,” as does an imperial ruler. God who is love seeks to be close to, not distant from creation.

The purpose of Trinitarian theology is not to define God or God’s “substance,” but to describe the whole, interrelated gracious movement of God who seeks communion—intimate relationship—with what God has created. Creation is far more than just a backdrop for God’s main redemptive activity in human history. It is the redemption of *all* creation



that is at stake (Rom 8), not redemption *from* creation.

God's labors of creation, preservation, and redemption are not three separate or separable works but a single labor, whose object is precisely the birthing of the world that God intends. God is "in labor" in the world, for the world, that it might become what, in its conception, it is.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, God is the source, power and goal—the spirit that enlivens the complex processes of creation. God is the source of all being rather than one who intervenes from outside. This is how theologians such as Sallie McFague refer to God: as the inspirited body of the whole universe, creating, guiding and saving all that is. Rather than assuming God to be like a will or intellect ordering and controlling the world, God is the breath that enlivens and energizes the living breathing planet. God permeates, suffers with and energizes the innermost aspect of all that is created, in ways known and unknowable, in ways that are both intimate and transcendent.<sup>12</sup> We can only gratefully receive rather than solve this mystery.

Picturing God's activity in such organic ways is more appropriate

**What does this imply for how we might address or refer to God?**

**Reflect on how folk wisdom or spiritual traditions have shaped you. Is this what you heard in church? Why or why not?**

**What are some of the interrelationships in creation that climate change is making us more aware of?**

“In the Tanzanian village of Ngofila, people believe God is angry because of the cutting of the traditional forests where people used to go for prayers and rituals.” (Tanzania)

“In the Circle of Life of aboriginal peoples of North America, the circle symbolizes the fundamental harmony and wholeness that exists between all created beings—including animals and birds, trees and stones—with solidarity, reciprocity, respect and love. We all belong to a great community where everything is interconnected and interdependent.”

than in machine like ways, which have compounded the problems we face today. The machine model assumes that rational control is what is important, with God as the ultimate fixer. Instead, the focus shifts from control to relationships—interdependent relationships throughout all of creation.

This is similar to how many indigenous traditions and faiths have viewed the relationship between God and creation. The interdependence of everything has been common knowledge throughout most of world history—all the relationships necessary for life to flourish, including the predictability of the climate. Many indigenous peoples have long assumed such an ecological vision of life, in contrast to perspectives which value human life at the expense of other forms of life.

Taking creation seriously as God’s abode means that the physical space of creation becomes important. This spatial dimension has long been celebrated, for example, in the Psalms: “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! ... even the sparrow finds a home ... at your altars.” (Ps 84:1-3). We dwell in God who surrounds us, from before and beyond all time: “Lord, you have been

our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, and ever you have formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (Ps 90:1-2).

The incarnation—God becoming fully human in Jesus of Nazareth—is the clearest testimony to God’s intimate relationship with what is created. In him, divinity and humanity, heaven and earth are brought together. The central festivals of the church year emphasize this in powerfully poetic and symbolic ways. At Christmas, “heaven and nature sing” as a bright star in the heavens is linked on earth with a lowly manger. On Good Friday, God is revealed in the One who suffers and dies with all of creation, and at Easter, heaven and earth exult with the living God. At Pentecost, the wind of the Spirit blew from heaven, empowering those in the early church to communicate across their earth-bound differences.

“In Africa, the philosophy of ubuntu, which refers especially to relations human beings have with each other, recognizes that the community also includes animals, plants and the rest of creation—all contribute to the community’s well-being.”

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1:1, 14).



## IV. So what about human beings?

In recent centuries in the West, and throughout much of the world today, the above perspectives have been overshadowed. Some human beings have acted as if they were demigods who can order and control, for their own self-interests, the land, trees, air, water and other creatures, including vulnerable human communities. This often occurs in the name of “development” or “progress.” The air, water, soil and plants are valued in so far as they will further human development or progress, rather than because of their own intrinsic worth. The accumulation of money and goods has displaced the liberating economy of the Creator, based on synergy, cooperation and life-enhancing justice for all of creation.

Consequently, the delicate interrelationships within creation have been upset. Creation’s protest is now being experienced through climate change.

Being creatures within creation is at the core of a Christian anthropology. However, many human beings have lost the sense of being part of a living,

“The greatest cause of nature’s disintegration is humanity’s seeming inability to understand its essential solidarity with all other forms of life, and to act upon that understanding.”

“Because of the incredible progress in technology, people tend to forget about the most organic, most basic things, such as responsibility for the future generations, relationships, and, of course, God. We used to rely on the wisdom of older people, but nowadays for the younger generations who are in charge, there is less need for God, or any other transcendent values. People tend to think they are able to achieve, learn and discover anything they want all by themselves.”  
(A youth from Poland)

“We live in patterns of inter-connection that are both personally enlivening, and in common with all that is creaturely.”<sup>14</sup>

changing, dynamic cosmos, which has its being in and through God.

Based on the two creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, human beings have often assumed themselves to be the crown of creation, or the main purpose for which God created everything else. This has been due to misunderstanding the call to “have dominion over” (Gen 1:28) in ways that have led to the exploitation of creation, rather than a sense of responsibility and accountability for what God has created. In Genesis 2, in the midst of the plants and water of the garden, God forms the first human being from the dusty earth and breathes life into *‘adam*. Tilling and keeping the garden—cultivating and preserving God’s creation—is the mandate given to humans. Human beings are to be servants of the rest of creation, not its rulers. This is similar to how in Mark 10:41-45, Jesus calls the disciples to follow him by serving rather than ruling over others.

Assuming human beings are separate from or above nature can imply a complete freedom of action toward creation—using or exploiting it in ways that serve human ends, or as “raw material for human sustenance and aggrandizement.”<sup>15</sup> Instead, creation has a dignity and purpose that goes beyond human purposes.

“Living a selfish lifestyle and wasting natural resources breaks the bond between humanity and God, but also between humanity and the rest of God’s creation.” (Estonia)

Sin and salvation are both spiritual and earthly matters; they have to do with how we relate to the forms of God's presence we encounter in our daily, ordinary lives.<sup>16</sup> Sin is our failure to live out of the relational matrix we share with the rest of creation and with God. It is our refusal to remove ourselves from the center of the world. We attempt to escape our creaturehood and the relationships and vocation that belong to it. Sin is living falsely, contrary to the appropriate relationships that constitute reality. When relationships are violated, injustice, abuse and destruction result. Sin is refusing to accept the limits and responsibilities of our place within the whole of creation.

"Unless we recover a sense of human beings being a part of the rest of creation, 'we shall only accomplish a sufficient cleaning up of industrial procedures to secure profits and a reasonably comfortable life for one generation or so, and fail to penetrate the heart of the problem.'"<sup>17</sup>

Environmental exclusion in the form of exile is a core theme of the Old Testament, and it speaks to the condition of those millions who are already finding they are forced to migrate from their ancestral lands because of drought and flood caused by climate change.<sup>18</sup>

The writings of the Old Testament Prophets repeatedly remind us that God will not tolerate injustices inflicted on other human beings and on the rest of creation, through dominating power, control and oppression. However, in many of these passages

"The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant" (Isa 24:5).

where God responds to injustice, God is depicted as an all-controlling male ruler or warrior who acts in punitive, violent, destructive ways. The problem is that this legitimizes rather than transforming patterns of violence against humanity and creation.

The power to change the injustices should be consistent with God's overall purpose of restoring and transforming creation. Carol Dempsey indicates how this is conveyed in especially chapters 42, 49, 52, 53, 61 and 65 of the Book of Isaiah:

"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth...no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.... They shall build houses and inhabit them: they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.... They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain" (Isa 65:17; 19; 21; 25).

"I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground, and I will abolish the bow, the sword and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety" (Hos 2:18).

(1) The redemption of humankind is connected to the restoration of creation; (2) the human community has a responsibility toward all creation; (3) the vision of Isaiah 65:17-25 can no longer remain apocalyptic or eschatological but must become a reality for the planet and life on the planet; (4) the divine vision for all creation is one that speaks of respect for all of life and life lived in balance and relationship....The focus must shift from the use of power to dominate, control and oppress to the use of power to empower oneself and others and liberate all of creation from its groaning and oppression.<sup>19</sup>

The call to repentance in Mark 1:15 can be heard as a call to return to a



proper relationship with the Creator and creation, “a call to be liberated from our human perceived need to be God, and instead to assume our rightful place in the world as humble two-leggeds in the circle of creation with all the other created.”<sup>20</sup>

**Given the kairos of climate change today, there is an urgent need for repentance or conversion.**

“Suppose we really believed that the rape of the earth is blasphemous!”<sup>21</sup>

We need to shift from:

- Human independence, **to** human interdependence with the rest of creation
- Making separations based on oppositions and dualisms, **to** emphasizing interrelated balances and connections
- Technological control, **to** respect for, care and balanced use of creation and its resources, including through appropriate technologies
- Creation as only the backdrop for human worship, **to** creation pulsating with life, pathos and worship of God
- An exclusive focus on God active in human history, **to** God active in, with and through the spatial

“Return to the Lord you God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing” (Joel 2:13).

realities of the whole creation, in which humans participate

- A predominantly Christocentric focus on the redemption of human beings, **to** Trinitarian thinking that takes more seriously creation, the Spirit and the interrelationships throughout the cosmos, with all of creation as the scope of redemption
- Sin only as a broken relationship between humans and God, **to** the sinful ways relationships with creation are broken
- God's grace separate from nature, **to** God's grace known in, with, through and transformative of nature
- Transcendence that is spiritualized and removed from the life and matter of creation, **to** a sense of the divine mysteriously active in, with and through what is created
- An obsession with progress and development as measured in economic terms, **to** what will result in more sustainable life for all of creation
- Allegiance to the global market system, **to** being inspired by a

vision of God's economy for the sake of the well-being of all, including earth itself

- A focus only on technological or market-base "fixes," **to** the healing of creation.



*More than 60,000 people are estimated to have been displaced by the flood in Sunsari district, south-east Nepal, September, 2008. © LWF/DWS Nepal*

## V. The redemption of all creation

God's anger leads not to judgment but to redemption, not just of human beings, but of all creation: "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). Because of God's transforming grace, rather than because of fear, we are empowered to change our attitudes, lifestyles, and practices—to put things right again. The way things are now cannot continue with "business as usual." Instead, the God of grace who is active through, with and in nature, is revealing how urgent it is to recover the spiritual significance of valuing our common good with the rest of creation.<sup>22</sup>

"For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:19-21).

In the fourth century, St Ambrose wrote, "For the mystery of the Incarnation of God is the salvation of the whole of creation."<sup>23</sup> Salvation is the direction of creation, and creation is the place of salvation.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the health and well-being of all of creation is what salvation is about. Christ's liberating, healing and inclusive ministry takes place in and for creation. In Christ, God identifies

**Is this different from your understanding of salvation? How?**

“... for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rules or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together.... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1:16-17; 19-20).

with all suffering bodies, including the suffering of creation itself.

This cosmic scope of Christ is communicated especially in Colossians 1. The horizon of salvation or redemption or reconciliation is widened significantly here. Its focus is not on human beings; in fact, they are not even mentioned in this passage. Instead, celebrated here is the intimate relation of Christ and the whole of creation, from before the dawn of time. The fullness of God comes to dwell bodily in creation. The powers of this world are put in their place, and broken relationships throughout creation are restored or reconciled.

Similarly in Romans 8, salvation not only includes human beings but the whole cosmos. Creation itself longs for the revealing of those who, through the power of the Spirit, will rescue the whole created order, and bring about that justice and peace for which the whole creation yearns. This builds on the biblical promise of a new heaven and earth (Isa 65 and 66) and on the creation story in which human beings are to be caretakers of creation. The freedom for which creation longs will come about through human agents, transformed by the Spirit, to bring wise, healing and restorative justice to the whole creation.<sup>25</sup>

In the earthly life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels, we see one who was continually challenging the traditional dualisms by which people lived their lives: male over female, rich over poor, humans over nature. His compassionate love and justice embraced all of creation, leading him to cross all kinds of boundaries of his day.

**Reflect on examples in the Gospel where Jesus crossed boundaries such as these.**

Similarly, climate change transgresses boundaries, of both natural and human-defined separations, of communities, of nation-states, of lands, of waters, of near and distant neighbors, of rich and poor, of different cultures, of the past and the future. Many of its effects know no boundaries. Climate change reminds us that we are all in this together. It is the future of life on the planet that is at stake. Yet some bear the brunt and the consequences far more than others, and are far more vulnerable. Under climate change, nature has become “the new poor,” as vulnerable and expendable as poor human beings and communities have been. This is where our attention and priority especially needs to be.

The church is far more than a just another actor in civil society for addressing climate change. It has a global even cosmic expanse, crossing boundaries of both space and time. It

includes those who are contributing most dramatically to climate change as well as those rendered most vulnerable by it; together they are interconnected and transformed into each other, as members of one communion. The communion of saints crosses all boundaries of time—those in the past and in the present as well as future generations whose very possibilities for life are being jeopardized by climate change.

Furthermore, through the Sacraments, God's promises become tangible through common elements of creation—water, bread, and wine—through which we are redeemed, nourished and empowered. We are redeemed by God not apart from but through what is created. We have been washed in the waters of redemption in baptism and fed with the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Through these Sacraments, the life-sustaining power of God's promises is effected in us, as a foretaste of the feast to come. The church bears witness to the new creation, as a communion, as the body of Christ in the world that God has created and will bring to fulfillment.

"Understanding the interconnections of the carbon cycle of the planet means that all actions are interconnected by their effects on the carbon cycle—the spiritual solidarity of the people of God across space and time."<sup>26</sup>

Living out of this present and future reality, Christians should be at the forefront of redressing the effects



and changing the course of climate change.

- We are challenged to see new possibilities for reconciliation and restoration within creation, in ways that will benefit all rather than just a few.
- The reality of God's redemption is lived out as we pursue greater justice for all. It does not suffice to address the crises evoked by climate change through short-term fixes or "solutions" that only reflect the same old paths of economic and human progress which have brought us to this point.
- We must move beyond narrow anthropocentric views of life, and embrace more interconnected views in which God, human beings and the rest of creation are intimately related.
- When we do so, the injustices imposed on other communities or other realms of creation become all too apparent, as well as our capacity for putting things right again, in communion with the rest of creation.

"The whole will have achieved the consummation that is intended only when this errant, pathetic, tragic and much loved creature finds again its rightful place among the creatures."<sup>27</sup>



*Trift Glacier, Gadmental, Berner, Oberland, Switzerland.  
Composite image of 3 pictures showing glacier retreat  
from 1948 to 2006. From left to right: 1948, 2002, 2006.  
© Greenpeace / Gesellschaft für ökologische Forschung/  
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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> At [www.windows.ucar.edu/tour/link=/earth/climate/cli\\_effects.html&edu=high](http://www.windows.ucar.edu/tour/link=/earth/climate/cli_effects.html&edu=high)

<sup>2</sup> Agbonkhianimeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008), p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Bowman-Prediger and Peter Bakken (eds), *Evocations of Grace: The Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology, Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.157.

<sup>6</sup> Larry Rasmussen and Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, “The Reform Dynamic,” in Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme (eds), *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), p. 136.

<sup>7</sup> Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), p. 104.

<sup>8</sup> Hymn 682 in *With One Voice: A Lutheran Resource for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), p. 334.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Keller “The Flesh of God” in Darby Kathleen Ray (ed.), *Theology That Matters* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), p. 96.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), p. 167.

<sup>12</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), esp. pp. 145; 147.

<sup>13</sup> Hall, *op. cit.* (note 11), p. 337.

<sup>14</sup> Welker, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 160.

<sup>15</sup> Hall, *op. cit.* (note 11), p. 167.

<sup>16</sup> McFague, *op. cit.* (note 12), p. 114.

- <sup>17</sup> Sittler (1970) in Bouman-Prediger and Bakken, in *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 80.
- <sup>18</sup> Michael S. Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007), p. 161.
- <sup>19</sup> Carol J. Dempsey, *The Prophets: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), p. 179.
- <sup>20</sup> George Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), p. 113.
- <sup>21</sup> Sittler, *op. cit.* (note 17), p. 211.
- <sup>22</sup> Rolita Machila, “Why are Earth and God Angry?” issue 20 (August 2008) in the LWF “Thinking It Over” series; available at **[www.lutheranworld.org/What\\_We\\_Do/Dts/DTS-Welcome.html](http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/Dts/DTS-Welcome.html)**
- <sup>23</sup> Exposition of the Christian Faith, V, VIII, 105b.
- <sup>24</sup> McFague, *op. cit.* (note 12), p. 180.
- <sup>25</sup> N. Thomas Wright, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingden 2002), pp. 596-7
- <sup>26</sup> Northcott, *op. cit.* (note 18), p. 163.
- <sup>27</sup> Hall, *op. cit.* (note 11), p. 322.

## Appendix

### **What do you see, feel, believe in the face of climate change?**

An LWF survey (2008)

***What is different today?*** In recent years, what general changes have you noticed in the climate in your area? How is this affecting the land, the plants, the air, the animals and the people? What is different from what your parents or grandparents experienced?

***Who?*** Who or what is especially affected by these changes? Who especially bears the burden? Who or what is especially responsible for climate change?

***Why?*** How do people explain these changes? Why are they happening? (The stories or folk wisdom as well as more scientific explanations.)

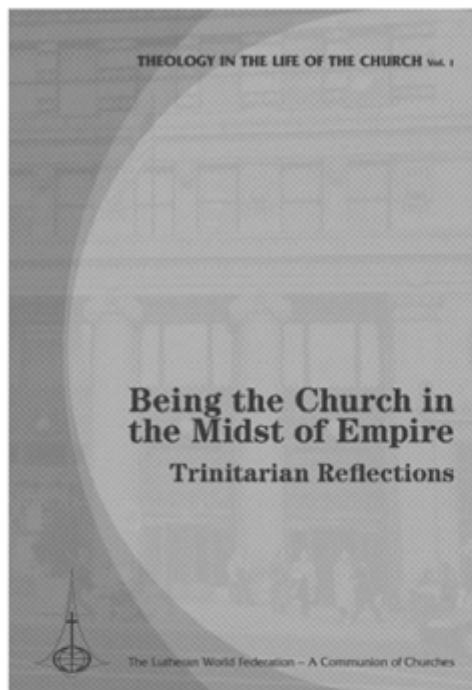
***What has gone wrong?*** In the relationship between human beings and the rest of creation? In the relationship between people? In the relationship with God?

***God?*** How do you feel God is related to or involved in this? What questions would you pose to God? How is your faith in God affected? What spiritual resources do you draw upon?

***The future?*** How do you view the future, for your community, coming generations, and the earth as a whole? What do you fear or hope for? What spiritual resources do you draw upon?

***Solutions?*** What needs to change in your society? What trade-offs are there? What is being done that can make a difference? What local solutions would you propose?





**Being the Church  
in the Midst of Empire.  
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**Karen L. Bloomquist, editor**

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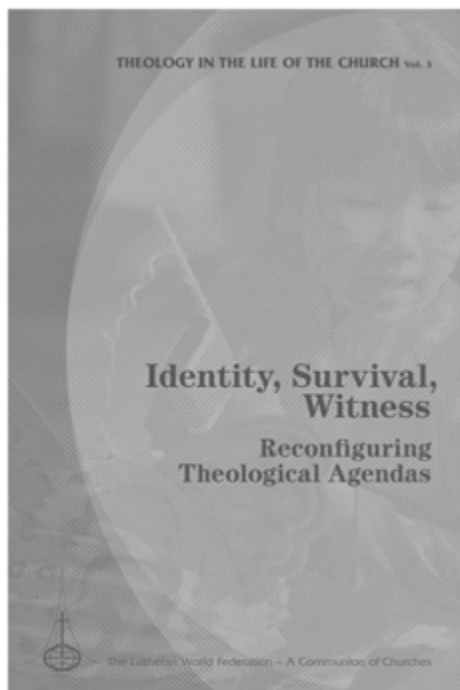
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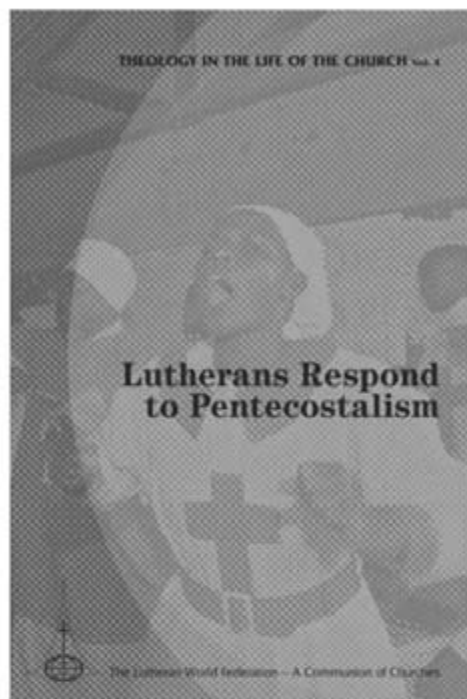
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