

## **Many Heavens, One Earth: Faith Commitments for a Living Planet**

If the world's media is to be believed, in one short week the UN Conference on Climate Change in Copenhagen (December 7–18) went from 'Hopenhagen' to 'Brokenhagen'. Nothing could be further from the truth. Copenhagen is a real political breakthrough because for the first time a climate change conference has attracted the leaders of over 190 countries. Whether rich or developing nations, each leader came in good faith representing billions of people.

The outcomes of Copenhagen are tangible. The agreement of the nations to cut greenhouse gases to prevent Earth's surface heating by more than 2 degrees Celsius before 2050 is critical to the survival of billions of people and of eco-systems that support millions of species of animals and plants. If the processes by which this is to be achieved are still to be formulated that is because the challenge is so new to humanity. But what is becoming clearer after Copenhagen is that humans, confronted by the reality of climate disruption, must respond with an adaptive policy.

If Copenhagen represents hope for the future, faith, hope and love were in abundance one month before at Windsor Castle (November 2–4) when representatives of the world's great religions convened to discuss the many initiatives they are unveiling to make a cleaner, more sustainable world for their followers.

The conference 'Many Heavens, One Earth: Faith Commitments for a Living Planet' was a joint initiative of the UN and the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC). So significant was the gathering that UN Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr Ban Ki-moon presented keynote, which was hosted by HRH Prince Philip, founder of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation.

The gathering of nearly 200 faith and secular leaders was attended by nine of the world's major faiths – Baha'ism, Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Shintoism and Sikhism. Each spoke on their commit to long-term practical action to save the environment.

The gathering was the first major, internationally coordinated commitment by the religions to the environment. Together there was mutual recognition of the sanctity of God's marvel of creation, and of independent actions already taken to conserve, renew and sustain. And how in raising awareness of global warming among their followers there are opportunities for shaping the behaviour and attitudes of the faithful for generations to come. If grassroots action is a call to act globally for the environment in faith, one newspaper's declaration that 'Many Heavens: One Earth' was "the biggest civil society movement on climate change in history" is a good description of the potential for the world's major religions to combine on a common threat. Certainly in this gathering God is in the conversation.

The huge range of practical initiatives unveiled reflects the diversity of the peoples attending. They ranged from new faith-based eco-labelling

standards for Islam; to Hinduism and Sikhism planting of 8.5 million trees in Tanzania; from sourcing sustainable fuel for India's Sikh gurdwaras (which feed 30 million people every day) to the greening of religious buildings and introducing eco tourism policies for pilgrimages – still the world's biggest travel events.

Catholic Earthcare Australia has been working with ARC since it launched its program to work with the world's major faiths on environmental issues in December 2007. The faiths were asked to consider how they could develop long term commitments for a Living Planet. They've come up with a huge number of initiatives, based on their own beliefs and practice, which will be rolled out in the shape of Five, Seven, Eight and Nine Year plans.

Catholic Earthcare Australia's contribution has been in a series of educational resources on the environment and the ASSISI environmental audit tool and sustainability initiative for church schools and institutions the pilot of which is now nearing completion.

At 'Many Heavens, One Earth' eighteen Christian faith traditions revealed their own long-term plans for environmental action, each of which is special to their own strengths and outreach. Some are deeply ambitious – the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania's Northern Diocese, for example, intends to plant 8.5 million trees in the Kilimanjaro region of Tanzania to tackle serious deforestation – while others focus on encouraging their members to adopt lifestyle changes for lasting change and impact.

What all have in common is the recognition that how we treat the earth is a moral issue – that caring for God's Creation is an imperative for the faithful. These long-term plans signify the growth of a movement that, in the words of the US interfaith ministry The Regeneration Project, "addresses ecological issues from theological roots". Many have widened this moral issue to include broader issues of justice and fairness:

- The Church of England recently set up the Climate Justice Fund to compensate communities overseas who are suffering most from the impacts of climate change;
- The Lutheran Church of Norway says that as a major oil producer, Norway has a special responsibility to mitigate the effects of petroleum extraction and protect vulnerable environments such as the Arctic; it intends to lobby the Norwegian Government to that effect;
- The Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa, the Greek Orthodox Church, intends to work with secular and government groups to co-ordinate action on environmental refugees and will also lobby to end the dumping of industrial waste in Africa;
- The plan for American evangelicals – 28 per cent of the US population – includes finding ways of integrating concern for 'creation care' with other justice issues;
- The Presbyterian Church in Cameroon intends to mobilise faith-based and civil society organisations to lobby the government on climate change action.

### **Celebrating God's Creation**

Many churches are incorporating an annual Creation Day or Creation Time

festival into their calendar of worship and contemplation, both to celebrate the beauty of God's world but also to focus attention on conservation and environmental issues.

As in Australia, with Catholic Earthcare's eco-auditing, elsewhere the churches are also getting their houses in order by looking at ways of 'greening' their buildings, institutions and pilgrimage sites, both in terms of making them more energy efficient and also in switching to renewable energy systems.

- The Armenian Apostolic Church is installing solar power in church properties and some public buildings such as kindergartens and bath houses;
- The Quakers in Britain are taking their main conference centre, Swarthmoor Hall in Cumbria, 'off-grid' in two to three years' time and considering whether to make some of their land available for commercial wind turbines;
- The Church of England intends to reduce its carbon footprint by 80 per cent by 2050 and 42 per cent by 2020;
- As well as looking at their own properties, the Orthodox Church of Poland will distribute practical guidelines on environmental protection to all Orthodox households during the traditional pastoral home visits after the Feast of the Epiphany. They'll also print all Orthodox books and publications on environmentally friendly paper;
- The Catholic Coalition on Climate Change (a partnership of 13 Catholic organisations in the US) will look at how to tailor Catholic investments to support renewable energy technology and companies reducing their energy use and promoting sustainable energy.

It has been called "the biggest civil society movement on climate change in history"... Personally I am inspired by the sense of growing solidarity amongst the faith traditions to care for creation and I am looking forward to seeing how the plans unfold.