

This is a re-visiting of our 2013 series on ecological sustainability led by John Tallmadge and Bill Shuster. We want to offer new ways of thinking about these issues, and give consideration to taking the Presbyterian “Earth Care Congregations” Pledge.

Our “Covenant” document of 2013, which was affirmed then by the Session, is attached below.

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First, let’s clarify our use of the term Sustainability. The best thing to do here is always to specify the “of” that follows – “sustainability *of what?*” The word has become all-too-familiar in the media and advertising in the past decade or so, where corporations and institutions, for example, often use “sustainability” to refer just to themselves, rather than the planet: “can we continue doing what we are doing?” This can even become “green-washing” if what they are doing is not actually in line with “sustaining the planet.”

Here is a description from William McDonough’s *Hannover Principles* (McDonough is the foremost “prophet” of sustainability in the environmental design fields; this was written for designers in the early 1990s):

“The concept of sustainability has been introduced to combine concern for the well-being of the planet with continued growth and human development. Though there is much debate as to what the word actually suggests, we can put forth the definition offered by the World Commission on Environment and Development: ***‘Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’*** . . . In its original context, this definition was stated solely from the human point of view. In order to embrace the idea of a global ecology with intrinsic value, the meaning ***must be expanded to allow all parts of nature*** to meet their own needs now and in the future.

[<http://www.mcdonough.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Hannover-Principles-1992.pdf>]

Our definition in the 2013 “Covenant” document (Point #1) was similar. Here are the *essential* ingredients: It’s about ***the planet*** and ***all its ecosystems***. It is for ***future generations*** and ***all of life***. And of course it means ***indefinitely in time without degradations or depletions***.

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Second, let’s come to grips with the overall challenges before us. With this all taken into account, ***the way we are living and consuming (in the advanced West, and now China) is NOT sustainable.*** (We may be able, or well advised, not to use the term “sustainable” at all, if this fact is not going to be a clear and obvious conclusion.)

This is a huge challenge, to be sure. How would we begin to work on this? What to do? It seems overwhelming; we all probably already feel the challenging scope of this, to some degree. To get started, it would be important to approach it from “two ends,” so to speak, of a scope spectrum: At one end there are ***many SMALL things*** we could be doing to adjust our way of life. But to be focused and motivated we also need to have in view the ***BIG thing*** that, ultimately, needs to be done.

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So third, let’s review and expand on the many SMALL things we are already aware of, and doing. As a reminder, we can all think of Bill Shuster’s “Hefty” zipper bag that he brought to the 2013 Encounters sessions, and that he had washed and re-used many times (I’ll never fail to think of that when I reluctantly pull a fresh one out of the box!). Yes,

from the tiniest example, we can be inspired to “reduce, re-use, recycle, conserve,” with an impact on many areas of our lives: Where we live, What we drive, Where we invest, What we eat, What (and how much) we buy, Where we buy it, What (and how much) we throw-away, Our everyday habits – in short, most of our very “way of life” is to some degree suspect here. And, as we already understand to a great extent, much of this is also connected to social-justice, eco-justice, global-justice, fair-trade, local, and organic production, etc.

As a community, we can learn much about the issues involved in this, how our small actions can help, and why. We will need to educate ourselves (#2 on Covenant List); we can do so incrementally and within a variety of supportive networks (#5 on the Covenant List).

By the way, **the “we” in all of this** is: as individual households, as communities, as a city, or a nation; it can be as a single church congregation, as Presbyterians, or as **The Church**, the Christian Tradition.

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Fourth, we also need to open up the BIG thing, the HUGE thing really. Whether as individuals or institutions we’ve been brave enough to face it squarely or not, the “Elephant in Humanity’s Room” right now is: **Atmospheric Carbon Levels, Global Climate Change, and the Fossil Fuel Industry.** Just this week it was reported that this February in the US was 2+ degrees above average, the largest jump on record, with the majority of that interval attributed to human action. During the same month, Alaska spiked to something like 18 degrees above the previous average. Polar ice caps will be gone in summers within a few decades, and the sun will warm the dark ocean water there much faster than the reflective ice. Of course, there is lots more of this kind of news, as we all know. Most new reports from climate scientists, as you’ve maybe noticed, begin with “this is happening even faster than we had predicted.”

Climate experts James Hansen and Bill McKibben break this down and lay it out for us pretty clearly, with some of the key numbers. First, Hansen:

“If humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted, paleoclimate evidence and ongoing climate change suggest that CO₂ will need to be reduced from [current levels] to at most 350 ppm.”

[Quoted in Bill McKibben’s web resource <http://350.org/about/science/>]

That’s **350 “parts per million” in the earth’s atmosphere.** It’s the planet, not just our country, or the developed West, that’s being impacted, even though we, now along with China, produce most of the carbon. So here’s McKibben with some more numbers:

“Right now we’re at 400 ppm, and we’re adding 2 ppm of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere every year. Unless we are able to rapidly turn that around and return to below 350 ppm this century, we risk triggering tipping points and irreversible impacts that could send climate change spinning truly beyond our control.”

[in *Rolling Stone*, citation below]

Admittedly, these numbers are abstractions, from the physics of carbon-induced climate change. But the stories of climate catastrophes, monster storms, shifting ecosystems, disproportionate impacts on poor cultures worldwide, and so on, all bear out these facts. Now, here are the scariest numbers of all, showing where **the fossil fuel industry** is actually, intentionally leading us – again, Bill McKibben (check out his 350.org website):

“We have five times as much oil and coal and gas on the books (the planned reserves of extraction companies) as climate scientists think is safe to burn. We’d have to keep 80 percent of those reserves

locked away underground to avoid that fate (a catastrophic 2+ degree C rise in global temperatures). Before we knew those numbers, our fate had been likely. Now, barring some massive intervention, it seems certain.”

[\[http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/global-warmings-terrifying-new-math-0120719#ixzz42v2tGa4F\]](http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/global-warmings-terrifying-new-math-0120719#ixzz42v2tGa4F)

So, how do we face this situation? Our way of life causes us to **buy and burn large quantities of fossil fuels** which are not-so-slowly making catastrophe-inducing changes to our planet, and many of its most vulnerable human (and other living) populations. Obviously, it seems overwhelming. This is the **BIG** end of the “scope-spectrum” I mentioned earlier. It seems that a sense of urgency is needed to motivate us to tackle not only the **SMALL** changes we can make in our lives, but also the **BIG** ones the planet needs.

At this point, we might try to put this into the language of The Church: Given that we humans are increasingly and catastrophically screwing up the planet... **What is God Calling Us To Do?** (I’ll admit that this version of the question leaves me at kind of a theological impasse, so let me put it a different way...)

What would a Prophetic Witness look like, given a full realization of this situation?

Now, before going any further, we should take note: Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church, we, this congregation, just to operate our church buildings, buys and burns **\$40,000 worth of fossil fuels every year. Over the next ten years (with rates that only rise) that will be Half a Million Dollars.** (I haven’t yet calculated how many tons of carbon that is...)

We should all find that quite alarming. In our Covenant document, we mentioned the importance of having an ultimate goal (such as #3 on the list) that reaches for the **BIG things** as well as the **SMALL things**. Though it may seem like it needs to be a far off goal, and it may even seem nearly impossible, the historical fact here is:

This church already knows how to take on big challenges.

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I want to get personal from here on: First of all, my wife Marcia and I, when we had the opportunity to build a new house in 2012-13, made a commitment, for a variety of economic and ethical reasons, to go as far toward “No Fossil Fuels” as possible. The result was a LEED-Platinum-rated, inner-suburb-located, passive-solar-geothermal design that gets us within reach of being able to buy carbon offsets for the small amount of gas and coal-generated electricity that we still burn annually. But that’s a story, maybe, for another day.

The other personal narrative is more directly church-related: how much I learned by being involved in the whole historical process of this Church’s **Inclusion Movement, and Policy**, in the early 1990s, and its aftermath. It was a life-changing experience for all of us, it was eye-opening, heart-opening, gut-wrenching, and not at all easy.

But, as a church, we learned a lot about **how to address a HUGE MORAL, ETHICAL, SPIRITUAL CHASM**. It could be, in other words, that we actually, already, know how to do this. In short, a really **BIG THING** was seriously wrong with the church, and the world, and we figured out how to stand up and **Be a Prophetic Witness**. And we succeeded, finally.

So, I believe that we could learn quite a bit from ourselves, by following this historical analogy. Here then were the key stages in that process, so let’s see what it may suggest for how we could resolve to face **THIS HUGE, MORAL, ETHICAL, SPIRITUAL CHASM**. Simply put, there were four:

First, with help from a few leaders, we discovered and learned about **what was wrong**, and why. In Adult Encounters and Session Meetings, we learned the **scope and impacts** of the problem, we heard the stories, we gained the

motivation to see it solved. We discovered how gays were being persecuted in the church, something which many of us hetero's had not been thinking about at all, and **it became "obvious"** what needed to change, and **what we needed to do. So, step ONE: learn the facts and scope of the problem, build the motivation to solve it.** Now, this would mean sustainability education; the Earth Care Program provides resources for a beginning. The "facts" of the "problem" and its consequences need to be openly and widely shared.

Second, with courage in the face of difficulty we resolved to **do the right thing now**, to immediately "become the change" we wanted to see. As a Session and as a congregation, we began ordaining Gay and Lesbian persons, we made open declarations about it, we connected with resources and networks (More Light, for example), and we became witnesses for the cause in the larger denomination and in the public world. We got a lot of attention and, although a few folks left who could not align with this cause, we also saw significant church growth. **So, step TWO: start immediately doing the right thing, don't wait until it is easy, and tell the world about it.** Now, this would be doing the work with our facilities and operations (getting to carbon-neutral and waste-free – #3 on the Covenant List), and making it known.

Third, as we continued in the inclusion process, we encountered many difficulties and obstacles. We had to figure out what was at work behind them, and do a lot of work to clear them, with much advocacy, wisdom, persuasion, and patience. Facing down the opposing forces, both in the Church and in society, became a dominant mission outreach. **So, step THREE, engage the difficulties and as an outreach program work for change, for new visions, solutions, and practices.** Now (#4 on the Covenant List), we'd be facing entrenched fossil fuel use and interests, urban sprawl, weak governmental action, and economic disincentives, for example.

Fourth, throughout the process, we deepened our ethical and spiritual understandings in support of the work of inclusion. We re-read our scriptures, and maybe other scriptures too; we found unexpected resources to strengthen our witness and advocacy/mission efforts. **So, step FOUR, strengthen ourselves for a difficult process, ready to move forward with faith and hope, and eventual success.** Now, environmental justice, in all its meanings, will require expanding our horizon of ethical action, and deepening our reverence, wonder, respect, and love for all life on this planet (#6 and #7 on the Covenant List), which we can enhance through worship, as well as education and action.

Toward A Faithful COVENANT

**To Sustain The Earth Community:
a Sustainability Initiative at Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church**

-- Draft (Version 1/22/2013) by John Hancock, John Tallmadge, and Bill Shuster; and affirmed by The Session

In our time, human activity has subjected the social and ecological systems of planet Earth to unprecedented stress. Global climate change, habitat loss, extinctions, overpopulation, and pollution degrade the biosphere while epidemics, poverty, resource depletion, radical inequality, war, and violence degrade the human world. Present habits and trends cannot be sustained without serious and perhaps fatal damage to the Earth and its communities of life.

In a sustainable world humanity and nature would flourish in mutually enhancing ways. Human communities would care for one another, using resources modestly and equitably, without impairing the ability of future generations or other life communities to meet their needs.

As a church we aspire to contribute in thought, word, and deed to the quest for a sustainable world, grounding our individual and collective efforts in core values of our Christian faith, including stewardship, mindfulness, generosity, social justice, repentance, compassion, and sacrifice, and organizing our studies and actions along such vectors as:

1. A SHARED DEFINITION of "sustainability" such as, "patterns of living and resource use that allow us to live well, without decreasing the ability of future generations and other communities of life to do the same."

2. AN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM to “unpack” the many aspects and dimensions of our life-patterns, consumption, resources, environment, ecology, ethical choices, etc.; that are part of “the problem.” (water, energy, driving, trash, food-choices, etc.)
3. A CONCRETE LONG-TERM GOAL, such as: “get to zero carbon and zero waste within (approx. 10) years,” along with the stories, background, and ethics that motivate it; pledge to individual households as well as the “church household.”
4. ACTION-BASED LEARNING to find out in practice which new and different behaviors and choices are possible (and to do them), and which are not because of entrenched systems (and to work for change).
5. DROPS-IN-THE-OCEAN LEADERSHIP TO BUILD A COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT to demonstrate changes that can begin at home, to show by example and educate others about how increments lead to solutions, to discover what is possible, to ask questions and hear the experience of other seekers and to open up new possibilities, and to engage in cooperative outreach and dialogue with other organizations and initiatives such as Presbyterian Earth Care congregations, Green Umbrella, and Imago
6. ETHICAL REFLECTION to expand the horizon of ethical judgments beyond the merely-human sphere, to encompass all of the earth, environment, ecology, creation; with historical perspectives on other such significant expansions (abolition of slavery for example), and other world-views we can learn from (e.g., pre-Socratic or Native American).
7. SPRITUAL DIMENSIONS that connect these issues and imperatives to our own (as well as other) faith traditions, cultivating attitudes of respect, reverence, unity, and wonder, in the presence of our earth/world.