

## *Christian Faith and the Environment*

### Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to Kate and myself to give the Steve de Gruchy Memorial lecture for 2017. The subject is really important. Thank you for the b

We want to give you the essential outline and then open discussion to some crucial questions.

**Michael Ramsey**, that wonderful theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury, told this story that I love:

*When you get to heaven - and he did not say "if" but "when"- Jesus will ask you "Did you enjoy the world God made for you? This is a very clever question, because it is asking if you made the most of this beautiful, wonderful world, or whether you were so trapped in poverty, discrimination, prejudice, violence and war, you could not enjoy it.*

We are now getting to the point of having to ask ourselves "Will we be able to enjoy God's world?"

Looking to the future, not too far ahead:

On one hand we have growing populations, said to be levelling out at 9 billion people. Take one country in Africa, Kenya: At the time of independence in 1963 there were 7 million Kenyans, now there are more than 49 million, projected to rise to 85 million by 2040.

On the other hand we have diminishing natural resources.

This is a potent combination for future conflict and disaster.

Add climate change and the situation is really alarming. What do we say as Christians about a loving God who counts the very hairs of our heads when millions are suffering, deprived and facing famine?

We need to recognise that God is concerned about our well-being in the here and now. God is concerned about life on Earth - all life, not just us, or even worse, just us Christians! Our Christian faith is not and should not just be about getting people to heaven, though you would hardly think so hearing the sermons of many churches!

[Karl Marx's criticism of religion was that he saw the established churches emphasising the hereafter. Grossly exploited workers of his time were being promised rewards in heaven if they behaved themselves in this life. We know the wealth of the mill owners and the exploitation of workers at that time.]

Does that not continue?

But the Bible, in both the Old and New Testament, is quite clear that God is concerned about our condition here on Earth. Our daily prayer and our Christian task is to further the coming of God's Kingdom. We pray that God's will, **will** be done on Earth as it is already being done in heaven.

But in acknowledging this, we face the dilemma of the divide between social activists who are concerned about the well-being of people, and environmentalists who emphasise the need to care for the natural world.

In 2007 Steve de Gruchy wrote a seminal paper, *An Olive Agenda: First thoughts on a metaphorical theology of development*.

I quote Steve:

'The brown agenda is concerned with poverty.....It drives us to deal with economics, for the solution lies in structuring the economy- globally, nationally and locally - so as to 'make poverty history'.

'The green agenda is concerned with the environment....For those who believe that God has created the earth good, and that we human beings hold it in stewardship for the next generations.

'We have urgently to blend the green agenda with the brown agenda.....The choice is not an either/or, but very definitely a both/and, and it is this blending of the two that we bring to the foreground when we speak of an olive agenda.'

**Now Kate is going to show why this is so important.**

(Power Point Slides on the state of the Planet)

The **Olive agenda** is brilliant, and essential and basic common sense. And for this we are deeply indebted to Steve, and all the more grateful for his contribution and saddened by his sudden passing.

Yet I don't see it being overwhelmingly adopted. Even more important, I don't see the churches or the world recognising the need to seek justice and care for the well-being of people and the planet. Why? Why when we are totally dependent on the life of this planet?

**Why**, when there is overwhelming evidence that we are destroying our life support systems and causing the climate to change.

I am convinced, that it is our current economic systems and structures that are premised on "economic growth" and GDP as deciding factors.

There have been some attempts to redress our present capitalist system by including the costs to the well-being of people and the impact on the natural environment of economic activities, for example with mining and workers conditions and pollution of land and water. But let's face it, we know it is the bottom line of profit that counts.

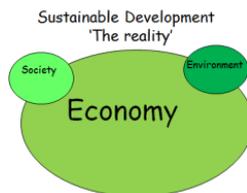
**Sustainable Development** comprises three components: Society, Environment and Economics, or as I like to describe it, People, Planet and Profit. The three components were to be held in tension and balance with each other.

Components of  
'Sustainable Development'



We know too that this is not the case. Economics dominates.

In reality, the Sustainable Development  
model is more like this:  
Economics is dominant



We make our decisions on economic profitability and efficiency - what makes the most money?

Our society holds out the acquisition of money as the goal of life. With the mantra “get rich, get rich, get rich”.

But let us change this. We brought about our present economic system. We can change it. We know that Jesus told us “**not to store up for ourselves treasures on earth...but to strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well**”.

We have to acknowledge that we can't get rid of capitalism overnight but what we can do is alter the goals and ethics of our societies: our goals must be **the well-being of people and the well-being of the planet**.

We have to assess and judge all our economic activities under the question and goal of whether decisions and activities will further the well-being of people AND planet.

Money is just a tool, not an end in itself.

We know there are enough resources to feed all on this planet. It is reported that forty percent of food is wasted every day. There are also resources to preserve, protect, care for and look after all of life on this planet.

But economics dominates because, we are told, we must have economic growth because of population growth and therefore do all we can to grow the economy.

There are two considerations here - **population growth and economic growth:**

1) We must take population growth into account. But we know that people need to be able rise out of poverty in order to limit their families.

In 1994 the UN held its International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Cairo Conference. It was widely recognised that gender justice and the education of women were prerequisites for population and development programmes.

The 2014 review of the programme reported that “development gains could not be sustained unless governments tackled the inequalities that hurt the poorest and most marginalized”.

But the debate continues as to which is most damaging to the well-being of the planet - over-population or over-consumption? When one looks at over-grazing, soil erosion, deforestation, one can argue that our resources are already stretched to the limit and an increase in population will provide a tipping point to catastrophe. But where has climate change come from? Who is responsible for highly intensive carbon life-styles involving tons of waste as we pursue our consumer, constant growth life-style? There is no doubt that it is our consumer lifestyle that is driving climate change and threatening the survival of 50% of species on this planet. Remember that Extinction is forever!

As people of faith we have to consider population growth. There are those who ask why religions seem to be a stumbling block in promoting family planning. Why don't Churches encourage family planning? In 1995 the Anglican Church of Southern Africa passed a resolution at its Synod in support of family planning and responsible parenthood. Modern medicine has extended life and saved millions from disease. So we must be responsible in the number of children we bring into this world.

Let's face it. We have fulfilled God's mandate in Genesis 1:28 to “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it”. We have done that! No longer is the human species under threat - except from the consequences of our own actions.

Pope Francis's call for justice for the poor is essential. There is enough wealth in the world for all to be fed. With greater security and education, families will bring fewer children into the world.

2) The second consideration - Poverty and Economic growth: There is now such inequality in the world that poverty cannot be eradicated. The inequalities are actually mind-boggling.

The Oxfam report: “Just 8 men own the same wealth as half the world”.

And the richest 1% have more wealth than the rest of the world combined.

I want to refer to Pope Francis' Encyclical LAUDATO SI'. I find this a hugely important document! Whatever aspect of theology or church life you are studying, you must read and imbibe Laudato Si'! I also suggest that you get the forthcoming *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*. It has an article on Laudato Si' with an introduction and conclusion by Prof Sue Rokoczy and, I believe, excellent insights into the importance of this Encyclical.

In that article I have asked "Why has globalisation dominated? Is it not because of our contemporary fixation on the worship of Mammon - riches and accumulated wealth? It panders to our greed and self-centred interests. Those in power and with wealth claim that economic growth is the way to overcome poverty and solve the problems of our planet. International instruments such as the World Bank, IMF, WEF, support this and most governments have bought into it.

Why? The Pope is quite clear: "Economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fails to take the context into account let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment" (LS 56).

We cannot sustain constant growth on a finite planet. The present goal of increased wealth is leading to gross inequalities, which in turn lead to greater conflict, violence, suffering and ill-health. The goal of increased wealth must be replaced with a goal of well-being for people and planet.

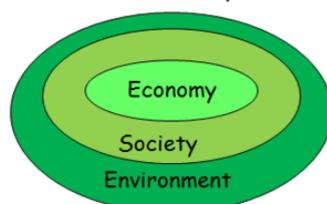
However you will find most countries, most financial organisations proclaiming the need for economic growth - constant growth on a finite planet with finite resources. We behave as if there is no tomorrow, no future generations. We are preparing a disastrous future for our children.

There are a host of books on "Prosperity without Growth" that you can read which are about greater equity and sharing of resources, to overcome poverty, without having to pursue relentless growth.

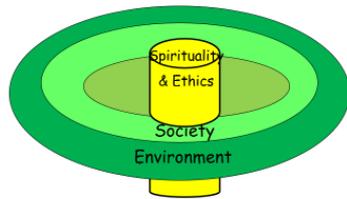
Two illustrations, again from Sustainable Development:

Nature is the foundation of all life

How sustainable development should be



Everything must be upheld within the natural environment.  
And there needs to be a fourth component: that of spiritual and ethical direction.



Spirituality at the core  
the 4<sup>th</sup> pillar of sustainability

So how do we bring about this change?

I want to emphasise that we- all of us - are called to take on the challenge of caring for God's creation.

Pope Francis calls for "decisive action": So:

- 1) Embrace Ecological care. Caring for God's creation is an integral part of our Christian responsibility - it is core Gospel business. And, as Pope Francis says, "Caring is something to be done with passion and love'.
- 2) Work for Justice and Peace - Eco-Justice, embracing Ecological and Economic Justice - the Olive Agenda of Steve - the only way to Peace.
- 3) Recognise that the Pope's call is to all of us - to all humanity.
- 4) Care for all of life. God does. "*God saw everything God had made, and indeed, it was very good*". (Genesis 1,31). God is concerned about the here and now on this one unique planet of life. So our task is to work with God for the coming of God's Kingdom, here on earth.
- 5) Lobby your Church!

I recollect at the height of Apartheid the government repeatedly trotted out Romans 13: "*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities*". But we cannot obey the authorities when they are doing wrong. The sea change needed since those heady days of the struggle in the 80s is that it is not only when authorities do wrong to people, but to the whole of creation. It is immoral, evil, wicked - how shall I describe it - to destroy God's creation, to destroy our water resources - on which all life depends - our air, our forests and marine resources, to cause the extinction of 50% of species, and bringing suffering to so many.

So people and companies should be brought to court for Ecocide that is the destruction of ecosystems. So Earth Jurisprudence needs to be implemented so that all life is protected by the law, not just human life. Rivers and forests should have a legal right to continue; creatures in the forest to have a legal right to have their habitat preserved.

These issues are all indications of probably the biggest crisis we humans have faced. It is now demanding our full attention.

If we are going to avoid descending into anarchy, I believe it must be the faith communities and faith leaders who uphold and apply ethical principles, and apply these ethical principles to all of life. And this is where we all come in. The Church does not hold political power, but it does hold influence. We must be pro-active in influencing political and economic decision makers.

These ethical principles have long been held before us, certainly as Christians and the monotheistic religions of Judaism and Islam. In fact all major religions hold Justice and Equity as prerequisites to Peace.

We know there are enough resources for all on this planet, but only if we apply equity.

This is foundational. To them we add Christian principles of love, compassion, caring and non-violence.

We should all be giving a lead, not just in lobbying our politicians, but in our own lifestyle and commitment.

**KATE:**

Let us look at what is being done:

**(Kate spoke on churches and faith communities that are taking action)**

**CONCLUSION**

Faith communities must work together. The challenge is so great that we must be united on this small planet, this global village.

So, how do we apply this? Recognise that caring for creation is a priority and that we must be inclusive, of all nations, religions, cultures and languages - and creatures!

Amen!

**Bishop Geoff Davies**

t + 27 21 788 6591

[geoff.davies@safcei.org.za](mailto:geoff.davies@safcei.org.za)

Patron

C + 27 83 754 5275

P O Box 106, Kalk Bay, 7990



**SOUTHERN AFRICAN FAITH COMMUNITIES' ENVIRONMENT INSTITUTE**

[www.safcei.org](http://www.safcei.org)

We have good guidance and direction from:

Steve de Gruchy's Olive Agenda.

See Bev Haddad's book: *Keeping Body and Soul Together*  
*Reflections by Steve de Gruchy on Theology and Development*

And Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si*.

I would add: *The Earth Charter*

My own analysis, increasingly recognised, is that our current economic direction and system is directly and fundamentally the primary cause of environmental destruction and economic injustice and inequality.

The fundamental question remains - How do we mainstream Eco-Theology?