Moving Earth from Margin to Mission
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Introduction

Archimedes said “give me a firm spot on which to stand, a lever long enough and a fulcrum, and I shall move the Earth”. That of course will never happen, and strictly speaking we don't need to move the Earth; but a seismic shift of major proportions is nevertheless needed. We need to shift our attitudes towards the Earth for the sake of the future of mission and more fundamentally of life on this planet. This essay will relate to ecology and mission within the context of significant diversity.

The current environmental situation presents us with a major and complex ethical challenge which might be approached from different perspectives and through various disciplines that need to be in conversation with each other, but from a faith perspective there is an opportunity to engage with those issues in a fresh and relevant missional way.

Mission and the Margins

First it is necessary to consider the broad theme of mission and the margins in order to understand fundamentally what we mean. Of course “the margins” refers to a category, and the danger is that in staying with the category, and thus, for example, to discuss “the poor”, or “dispossessed”, we run the very real risk of de-personalising the people involved. It is most important to remember that in the main we are actually talking about people.

A related risk is that we may develop a type of tunnel vision, with a one-track mind and understanding of the issues involved. When in mission terms we lose peripheral vision, we also lose the capacity to perceive emerging issues or even to hear the call of God to respond in some fresh way. The same basic principle applies in the area of the diversity which is an ever-increasing dimension of life today. The sound of our own convictions resonating in our head makes us deaf to any other way of understanding.

Many examples may be drawn from the ministry of Jesus and the history of the Church, in which the “invisible” victims are taken seriously. In the pious religious circles of his time, Jesus saw these otherwise good people either looking straight through the prostitutes, the tax collectors and those suffering from leprosy, or more to the point regarding them with something approaching contempt. Jesus for his part set a new standard; he saw these people. He reached out to those whom society as a whole regarded as beyond the pale and perhaps not worthy of human dignity.

The Church today, as for much of its history, has an ambiguous record in this regard. We have been and are generally aware of marginalised people, but often we have either ignored them or regarded them as collateral damage. At other times we have exercised diakonia towards them, as in Acts 6; there are numerous examples of “mission to” such people. But long before that, Hebrew prophets and even the Torah itself were aware of the needs of people, as in the requirements around gleaning.

Who are the marginalised today? The answer will depend to some extent on the context in which the question is being asked. But sadly the overall picture will not be markedly different from the world of 2,000 years ago. In many cases the theory may be different; we may verbalise a concern for the poor, but in fact largely fail to do anything significant about their situation or to try to deal with the underlying issues. Others, such as indigenous people or refugees, may feel not only the pain of marginalisation but also of demonization. No one is pretending that there are easy or painless answers, but the first step must be to acknowledge the situation as it is.
I want to note in particular the plight of refugees, of whom there are an estimated 15 million around the world. Many of these are as a result of war, famine, or oppressive and violent regimes; many also qualify under other headings such as poverty. The issues are too complex to enter into here. But it is at this point we begin to see human and ecological issues as two sides of the one coin. The situation may be changing slowly, but the fact is that for too long the Earth itself has been marginalised and taken for granted, and the planet is starting to rebel. Earth problems cannot be separated from victims of climate change and extreme weather.

A new category of environmental refugees is emerging, and the predictions are disturbing. The UN has estimated that there could be up to 50 million people in that category by 2020, while John Houghton, former head of the IPCC, stated in 2007 that climate change could create an additional 150 million refugees by 2050. In many cases these will be people who are driven from their homes by extreme climate change causing famine as in Africa. Equally we could think of farmers and graziers in Australia who may be forced off their land because the occasional drought is starting to look more like permanent climate change. In other situations it will be because their island home has been flooded by rising sea levels and is no longer habitable, as in Tuvalu. We can think of children growing up in Tuvalu, with the rising ocean robbing them of a play area and of space where a family might grow food. We can think of families in central Asia with their usually reliable source of water drying up due to climate change; where do they go?

Church and other agencies have a track record of seeking to respond to the many needs of these people. But it is not enough to provide ambulances at the bottom of the cliff; as Church and indeed as society we need even more to build a fence at the top of the cliff, and it is at this point our service in the name of the Christ needs to be pro-active.

Earth and Learning from the Margins

Second, what can we learn from those whose lives are lived at the margins? How can we move from the mindset of ‘mission to’ to one of ‘mission with’, and what might that look like? In general terms of human society such questions must be for others to address; my particular task here is to consider the plight of environmental refugees and especially the related matter of the Earth itself.

Like most people who find themselves victims and struggling to retain a measure of hope, environmental refugees in the main have a problem that has been imposed on them by people, structures and systems that are far distant from them; they themselves have had little or nothing to do with the creation of the situation in which they find themselves. That is an important basic point.

If we think beyond categories and numbers, we can begin to fit ourselves into the shoes (if they have any) of those victims. What can we learn from them? When we situate ourselves in their position we will quickly realize that they are people with feelings, hopes and aspirations just like us. We may well ponder what that might mean for us if we were in that position.

Several other points may be mentioned. Like the poor widow with her mite who put everything she had into the offering, poor people can be relatively generous. They will never be recognized as philanthropists, but their giving in percentage terms can be very high. It is for that reason Jesus declared that she had given more than all the others. But sometimes it is almost as if marginalised people don’t exist. Many of us live in a sanitised world in which unpleasant realities are effectively screened out. Those who live at the margins deserve to be noticed.

If marginalized people need to be noticed, it is certainly true that Earth too needs to be noticed; planet Earth is the often unrecognized victim and exists at the margin of our awareness. We take it
for granted, as we do with marginalised people. What can Earth teach us? There are several key factors. What might it mean for us to live in harmony with the Earth?

First, if we are observant we will notice that Earth is suffering far more than when Paul penned that phrase about “creation groaning in travail”. We like to think of the goodness of creation, but Duchrow and Liedke are surely correct in their assertion that the first point of reference today must be the suffering of creation. For the first time scholars are starting to refer to the present geological period as the Anthropocene; for the first time humans are able to change the climate of Earth, and even seriously consider the cost benefits of climate engineering. There are some serious dangers in this, and as Migliore suggests, every aspect of the current environmental situation is a challenge to the Christian doctrine of creation.

Second, we learn that Earth is generous in providing for the needs of human and other life. But as humans we are taking too much; we are taking more than Earth is able to give. Indeed, some of us are taking far more than our share. There is a fundamental principal that the resources of Earth are by definition limited, and from whatever vantage point we begin to address the issues, whether that be theological, ecological, political or economic, we will do well to keep that in mind.

Third, the globe is an eco-system containing various smaller eco-systems, and is therefore a prime example of unity in diversity. The phrase “unity in diversity” is not new, but it was certainly relevant to the theme of World Environment Day in 2010 – “Many Species. One Planet. One Future.” It is amazing to observe the ways in which quite diverse systems nevertheless relate with each other and indeed need each other. Biodiversity is a major environmental theme, and when it is diminished or lost the planet itself is diminished. There are powerful forces at work today trying to pull the world apart, yet only one viable future is possible, and that is a future in which we discover eco-unity in biodiversity, or what Sanguin describes as “the kindom of God”. We can certainly learn from that in terms of the way we relate in the human community.

Aboriginal people are marginalised, but they can teach us about living in harmony with Earth. I have written about this elsewhere, but their spirituality tells them that they belong to the Earth; the Earth does not belong to them. More than that, their belief systems indicate a clear responsibility to care for the Earth.

All of this raises the question of our own identity, of who we are. As I have suggested, both the natural world and human society are marked by significant diversity, but all life exists in relationship. We are, as many have noted, part of “the web of life”. As in the Covenant of Genesis 9, the divine commitment is to all life, and not just human life. We are part of God’s creation, and our future is inevitably bound up with that of all life on the planet. An important part of the identity question is what it means to be the oikos or household of God, and what that says about our mission regarding Earth. What does our identity as the people of God say about our mission responsibilities to Earth?

Holistic Eco-Mission
At the outset it is clear that eco-mission is not the whole of mission; however, I want to point to eco-mission as an expression of a more holistic approach to Christian engagement with the missio Dei which draws on basic theological themes such as creation, grace, and others.

Habel has identified three phases of mission. The first phase may be described as the most basic evangelism, or simply as “saving souls”. The second phase moves on to incorporate the human being as part of a wider community, and thus it includes what might be termed as social justice. It may be argued that the first phase on its own was never an adequate expression of the Great Commission; moreover, the second phase incorporates the first, and when that is based on Jesus’ teaching on the Kingdom of God it easily leads into a third phase which includes the whole Earth.
This is the approach that I describe as holistic eco-mission in that it includes the personal and social dimensions together with the ecological.

Since the Earth is God’s creation, this becomes a mission that engages Earthcare as an end in itself and not merely as a means to a different end. The Anglican 5th Mark of Mission expresses this very well, namely “to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth”. At the same time, it is still true that this is a mission in which the pain of a planet in distress cannot be separated from the varied needs of people. This relates to diakonia and the practicalities of ‘walking the talk’.

The key is clearly a biocentric or life-centred view of the world. There are of course differing perspectives within that framework, but fundamentally this is an approach that recognizes not only an inherent value and significance in all life, but also that there is an essential and indissoluble unity binding all life. In Christian terms, Birch extended the definition of “neighbour” to include all participants in life. He therefore proposes a Christian biocentric ethic as one that encompasses the whole of life, in which “the recognition of intrinsic value in creatures besides ourselves makes an ethical claim upon us to recognise our obligation toward them”.

Yet from a theological perspective a biocentric approach alone may be viewed as inadequate and that a theocentric or God-centred view offers the best hope of a balanced understanding of a global ecosystem and our place in it; with God as Creator at the centre, everything can assume its rightful place. More precisely, what is required, in Bouma-Prediger’s words, is a “creation-encompassing theocentrism”; the alternate term “theistic bio-centrism” is also precise in that it puts God and life at the centre, and offers a picture of God’s relationship with the creation.

Beyond a traditional human-centred approach to mission, engagement with Earth as a marginalised victim presents the possibility of engagement in Christian mission in some fresh and innovative ways. There are numerous examples. It is clearly not possible to provide a detailed analysis of practical eco-mission here. Even though eco-mission is adopted only by a minority in Australia, it is becoming increasingly significant. In 2010, the Uniting Church in Australia combined with the Five Leaf Eco-awards Church Project to publish the inspiring stories of 28 congregations or regional groups. Since then examples of eco-mission have increased greatly, and cover aspects such as worship and spirituality, community gardens, environmental audits, water conservation, solar power generation, community projects and personal lifestyle.

It also provides the opportunity for engagement with ecumenical, secular and interfaith groups, and the list of examples is growing. For example, the National Council of Churches in Australia has established the Eco-Mission Project (EMP) with the aim of enhancing dialogue and common action across the nation. The logistics involved are far from easy, but the hope is that a growing network will enable a greater sense of involvement and effectiveness. The value of this approach is even clearer in terms of a State-based group such as the Queensland Churches Environmental Network (QCEN) which is a Commission of Queensland Churches Together. Over the past several years the level of sharing has grown along with trust and encouragement, all of which leads to a stronger Church presence in the environmental sphere.

Some member Churches of QCEN are actively engaged with community groups such as Friends of the Earth in attempting to address some of the pressing environmental problems we face. Then too a group such as the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (ARRCC) which operates on an interfaith basis is actively seeking to work across religious diversity for the sake of the Earth. An “Open Letter from Australian Religious Leaders” in June 2013 began: “As people of faith, we draw attention to one of the most urgent moral issues facing us in the upcoming election”. It then goes on to talk about issues impacting on the climate and states that “we are despoiling the world given to us
as a sacred trust for future generations”. It was signed by eight Christian leaders from four denominations, in addition to leaders from the Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist faiths.

As I suggested earlier, there is a large and growing body of examples of a holistic eco-mission that reaches across not only the denominational and confessional divides but that of world religions as well. It is clear that within a wide diversity of thought and belief an authentic Christian ecological mission is possible.

**Interfaith Diversity**

If the potential is significant in Christian terms, it may be even greater when viewed in interfaith terms. Some decades ago when I was heavily involved in the ecumenical movement, it was common for the Greek word *oikoumene*, on which the word “ecumenical” is based, to be defined as relating to the whole inhabited world. In common usage it tends to have a far more restricted meaning, but that original meaning was important in that it was always a challenge to expand our horizon. That challenge is still apt, especially in today’s world when our perspective is often so limited.

Interfaith dialogue tends to make some people nervous. Some decades ago Wesley Ariarajah used the image of a tree to defend his involvement; if the roots of the tree go deep, he said, the branches can move in the breeze. But more precisely, in his book *The Church and Climate Change* Ernst Conradie indicates the need for a broad approach: “Remarkably, Christians will only be able to hear God’s word in conversation with people from other living faiths at the dialogue table – since climate change, perhaps for the first time in human history, is a challenge that can only be addressed through a collective, indeed a global effort.”

I want to suggest that there are a number of factors that offer a powerful incentive to explore a more ambitious goal. The first is that in many of the world’s religions today, including Christianity, there is a minority who hold what could only be described as extreme and intolerant positions with the effect of driving deep divisions between people, groups, nations, and often within nations. The painful and often dangerous outcome of this development is all too obvious.

The second factor is also a global one in every sense, and that is the pain of planet Earth. Again, it is not my purpose here to elaborate on that point; as I have suggested, the effects of climate change and non-sustainable ways of living are increasingly obvious, but inevitably they have their greatest impact on the poorest and most marginalized people who have had little input into the cause of the problem and who are least able to respond to it. But more than that, non-human life also has intrinsic value with its inclusion in the Rainbow Covenant of Genesis 9, and has no response capacity at all. As Denis Edwards and others remind us, all life on Earth owes its origin to stardust generated through enormous cosmic processes. So we are all in this together as part of what has been called “the web of life”, and we with all life are bound to suffer with a groaning Earth.

The third factor is crucial. Just as Christian environmental Statements express fundamental agreement across virtually all confessional positions and divisions, so there is broad agreement among world faiths. In the year 2000 the United Nations Interfaith Partnership for the Environment published a book called *Earth and Faith: A Book of Reflection for Action*. As the Director of the UNEP explained, this was the result of an effort “to continue the dialogue between the scientific and faith communities” from which, it is hoped, will emerge “a greater commitment to taking responsible actions for the protection of our environment for our common good.”

There are two issues in that. The first is a positive partnership between faith and science, and there is much that could be said about that, especially in the area of ecological issues and challenges. I feel sure that Moltmann’s Christian perspective might be shared by many people of other Faiths:
“The sciences have shown us how to understand creation as nature. Now theology must show science how nature is to be understood as creation.” In brief, the interface of faith and science represents an important and fruitful partnership. Through ecologists and others, science has been playing a truly prophetic role for a number of years now. It has alerted us to what we are doing to the environment, and what the consequences will be if we keep living in an unsustainable way. Faith and spirituality for its part touches deeper levels of purpose and belonging. We clearly need the contribution of both.

The second issue rising out of the UN book is the way in which the major world faiths converge in their attitude to environmental care, in spite of the differences between world faiths in other areas or the environmental negatives that have emanated from religious sources from time to time. Authorised representatives from the Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, Christian and other faiths each wrote a short first-hand account of their Faith’s teaching on environmental care, and the result is striking; in real terms they are in remarkable agreement on this issue, as they all enjoin their followers to a response of care.

The clear outcome of this convergence of belief is that, as the Edinburgh 2010 Conference affirmed, the care of the planet may be a rich area not only for fruitful interfaith dialogue but also for common action. The Director of the UNEP Adrian Amin wrote that “We … view the convergence of spiritual values and their respect for the environment as an inspiration for environmental actions today so that our succeeding generations may all be beneficiaries of a healthy planet and a development that is sustainable.” It is time to affirm our identity – not primarily as those who belong to a particular region, country, or even faith, but as people of Earth.

We do not need to sell our Christian souls in order to engage in interfaith dialogue and common action; indeed, such dialogue has been part of the global scene for many decades now. In like manner, we have nothing to lose and much to gain by joining with those of other faiths in the practice of Earthcare.

The theme of “the cosmic Christ” in Colossians 1:15-20 is significant; it speaks of the supremacy of Christ in the universe and in the church, and declares in verse 17 that “in him (Christ) all things hold together.” A second obvious theme is Paul’s analogy of the unity of the body in 1st Corinthians 12; clearly the body has many parts, and while some parts may seem more important than others, in fact all are essential for the health and wholeness of the body.

**Relocating Earth – or Us**

Why then do we need a relocation process? There are several principal reasons. First, the eco crisis is having a devastating impact on life generally. For example, there is something quintessentially Australian about the koala, and a photograph with one of those iconic marsupials is a “must” for most tourists. Yet their future is by no means certain; indeed, scientific forecasts suggest a grim future for many species. The Centre for Biological Diversity indicates that a background extinction rate of 1 to 5 species per year is normal, “we’re now losing species at 1,000 to 10,000 times the background rate, with as many as 30 to 50% of all species possibly heading towards extinction by mid-century. Given the inter-connection between all life, we cannot ultimately separate the prospects of other life from that of human life. There is a good reason why canaries were taken into coal mines!

Second, as I argued earlier, since as humans we are living beyond our means in ecological terms and taking more than the Earth has to give, we need to change our approach, to live more simply, and to learn to live in harmony not only with God but also with the Earth. Our current circumstances will not continue merely because we would prefer that; a rapidly rising global population combined with increased consumerism and the impacts of climate change should sound an alarm for world leaders.
Where on Earth are we as a people and as Church? There is no simple answer to this question. The Christian Faith and the Earth project which culminated in a Conference in Cape Town in August 2012 attempted to deal with this, and some work on the theme is ongoing. But in environmental terms we are at a critical point in history, and we need to take stock of where we are. The integrity of our theology and discipleship demands no less.

There is an important perception issue here; Earth may be regarded as a giant mine, as an object, or on the other hand as the most significant ‘other’ in life. Too often it is seen as a resource pool for the benefit of humans rather than being a creation for its own benefit. This problem is exacerbated by attitudes of extreme individualism and self-seeking. Not least, this may be described as the most basic ethical issue we face in that it touches not only the core of our faith, but indeed the most basic issues of human existence.

Conclusion

What emerges clearly in both a theological and a scientific approach is that, in Moltmann’s terms, we face the ultimate choice of “one world or none”\(^{xvi}\). One clear lesson we have had to learn from ecology is that species cannot be treated in isolation. More and more we are discovering that different forms of life are inter-connected, and that ecosystems are not only complex but also important for overall health. It is not surprising that science suggests an intricate pattern of relationships among life forms, and that, as Bradley argues, at its deepest level the universe is “a single unified whole, indivisible and bound together by a simple yet powerful force”\(^{xvii}\).

The clear implication is that as those who participate in the missio Dei we might learn to focus on things we hold in common, on the things that unite rather than divide. There is no gain in propounding a mission process that works by driving peoples apart; indeed, it is true that in looking to the best interests of Earth and of other life we are in fact looking after our own best interests as well!

Several biblical themes reflect unity in bio-diversity, beginning with the ancient theme of covenant. An early expression of that is the covenant that God established with all life. Clearly, as Fretheim\(^{xviii}\) declares, this has significant ecological implications; the fact that God “has made promises to nonhumans” means that “God cares for their life and seeks to enhance it in various ways”. We are thereby called, as those made in the image of God, to follow God’s lead in caring about all life.

In the great diversity of culture, religion, approach, and other factors, it is possible to find a unique and positive ecological mission. What all of this means is that “love” is a verb. Thus, theology must include a practical aspect, or to borrow Stacey’s phrase, it is a case of “doing theology”; there are several dimensions to that. First, the crisis that we face affects all life, and is global in character, so we can’t respond in isolation. Second, our Christian response of creation care is ultimately not motivated by a crisis, but by imperatives that rise out of the very heart of faith. Third, the slogan “think globally, act locally” has some relevance at this point. The truth is that as Church we have barely scratched the surface, but there is no substitute for local action, however minimal it may seem.

We have long been familiar with what we describe as the Moon or the Sun “rising” or “setting”, since from our perspective that is what they appear to do. But a famous photograph taken on the Moon appears to show the Earth “rising”; it all relates to a perception based on where we are standing. In physical terms it is obvious that we can’t move Earth anywhere, and there is not a pole and fulcrum large enough. So if the Earth is not going to move, then we will have to. We can change our perceptions, attitudes and actions. The task of moving Earth from margin to mission is a challenge that we urgently need to address.
1 UNHCR estimate.
7 See Ayre, *Earth Faith and Mission* Chapter 5.
10 Morethorpe, Jessica et al, *Greening the Church: Australian Churches tell their Inspiring Stories*. (Melbourne: Justice and International Mission Unit of Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Uniting Church in Australia).
15 Ayre, *Earth and Faith*, p4
16 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p34.