

# New Birth toward a New Earth

## *Regenerative Mission for Planetary Renewal*

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### Introduction

The planetary context today in which United Methodist Christians are seeking to give witness to the God of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is one increasingly marked by a host of biospheric crises. Those committed to God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer’s mission for the flourishing of life through the pursuit, inhabitation, and spread of scriptural holiness throughout the land are doing so amidst unprecedented climatic disruptions, widespread ecological degradation, devastating biodiversity loss, and related social, political, and economic emergencies. Any vision of United Methodist missional engagement for this present age, therefore, that does not include an honest recognition of and fervent response to the vulnerable state of the good earth, our common planetary home, will be profoundly inadequate in relation to the fullness of God’s saving purposes for the whole creation.

Of course, we the people called United Methodists *are* inadequate, by ourselves, to the enormous and complex challenge of bringing about what Pope Francis points to in calling for a “global ecological conversion” of individuals, institutions, cultures, and political-economic structures.<sup>1</sup> The resources of The United Methodist Church alone *are* incapable of realizing the “great work” Thomas Berry has described as the integration of all human activities into the rhythms and limits of the biosphere,<sup>2</sup> or the “great turning” Joanna Macy writes of in urging a shift from an industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilization.<sup>3</sup> As Pope Francis rightly proposes, only a broad, inclusive, and collaborative response, “a new and universal solidarity,”<sup>4</sup> will be sufficient for the necessary transformations ahead.

In that sense, one of the central missional questions for we United Methodists today, I would propose, is this: what might we have to contribute, in partnership with other people of faith and goodwill and in service to God’s universal *missio* for the flourishing of life, to this great work of acknowledging, understanding, and faithfully responding to the ecological crises of our time? What particular charisms of theological insight, organizational wisdom, and institutional influence might we faithfully embody and share with the church universal and the world—the *ecumene*, the inhabited worldwide household—God so loves?

Among other contributions, I am confident that the distinctive Wesleyan Methodist mark of a holistic faith in the regenerative powers of God for new life is a theological, spiritual, and ecclesial gift we United Methodist Christians are particularly equipped to contribute in an age of

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, (2015), para. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into The Future* (New York: Random House, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Joanna Macy, *Coming Back to Life* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> *Laudato Si’*, para. 14.

profound environmental destruction. The capacities to identify the causes and consequences of a rapidly changing climate; the pollution of water, air, and soil; and the disproportionately devastating impacts on the poor and communities of color are and will remain crucially important. At the same time, without a living witness to the promise of the new creation of persons, institutions, systems, and ultimately planet, criticism and condemnation alone will inevitably end in cynicism and despair. This chapter will begin, then, with a plain account of the threatened state of God's good earth, followed by a review of John Wesley's holistic understanding of salvation, and conclude with concrete proposals for how United Methodists might pursue regenerative holiness in the whole of life. My aim is to provide a vision of United Methodist mission that fosters the healing of creation in service to God's mission for life.

## The Great UnCreation

To account for the present state of our biospheric context means naming the reality that all of the major bio-systems supportive of life as we know it are threatened, in many cases, gravely. This disturbing reality is being described in various ways: for example, that we are living amidst a *Sixth Great Extinction* event (Elizabeth Kolbert)<sup>5</sup>; that the earth has entered a new geological era, the *Anthropocene* (Paul Crutzen), in which humans have become the predominant force impacting the basic structure and functioning of the earth<sup>6</sup>; that human civilizations worldwide face environmental *Collapse* (Jared Diamond).<sup>7</sup> What the descriptions all attempt to capture are the unnerving implications of the peer-reviewed findings over the last several decades from the scientific community. In one representative study, a team of twenty-eight of the world's leading Earth-systems scientists identified a list of planetary life support systems vital for human survival. The study reported on present rates of climate change, ocean acidification, biogeochemical nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, global freshwater use, land system change, and the rate of biological diversity loss. They concluded that "the exponential growth of human activities is raising concern that [any] further pressure on the Earth System [in any one of these areas] could destabilize critical biophysical systems and trigger abrupt or irreversible environmental changes that would be deleterious or even catastrophic for human well-being."<sup>8</sup>

For those who affirm that the earth and all that is in it (Ps. 24:1) is the work of God, that every created thing is good, and that altogether, the whole is indeed *very* good, the problem is that of a great undoing of God's generative purposes. The Hebrew word for *good* repeated throughout the first creation account in Genesis is *tov*. "And God saw that it was *tov*" (Gen. 1: 12, 18, 21, 25). *Tov* can be translated as *good* or *pleasing*, but it also implies "life-furthering" or "life-generating." As Christian ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda describes it, what came into being out of nothingness was not merely life; it was more, she says. "It was life capable of furthering life in ever more complex and life-generating forms. It was creative and life-creating life. This is the mystery of *tov*. And God says it over and over, seven times: 'God saw that it was *tov*.'"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Paul J. Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," *Nature*, no. 415.6867 (Jan. 3, 2002): 23.

<sup>7</sup> Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> J. Rockström, et al., "Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity," *Ecology and Society* 14, no. 2: 32.

<sup>9</sup> Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 55.

Life itself, as created by God, is generative and regenerative. Recognition of this grand mystery of the intricate, marvelous, ongoing *goodness* of the creation is cause alone for exuberant awe and praise. “O LORD, our Sovereign . . . / When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, / the moon and the stars that you have established . . . / how majestic is your name in all the earth” (Ps. 8:1, 3, 9 NRSV). Proper devotion, here, however, also places ecological degradation in proper theological relief. We are undoing the life-generating goodness freely given by the Creator, preserved in love, and sustained by God’s own life across innumerable life forms over countless generations. A review of the first account of creation in Genesis, in reverse, reveals the depth and breadth of this great unraveling:

*Earth’s Exhaustion:* The final day of creation, as told in the first Genesis account, is a day of rest (2:2-3). To *sabbath* is to rest, and rest is deemed holy by God. The whole created Earth, every system, every biotic and abiotic form, altogether, simply abiding in restful pose, is holy. Several decades ago, chemist James Lovelock introduced what he called the Gaia Hypothesis: the idea that the whole of the planet is like an organism, a kind of living body, capable of regulating the material conditions necessary for the continuance of life. Drawing on this metaphor, we can inquire about the state of God’s good earth as a living whole. Each year, the Global Footprint Network calculates the date human beings have used as much from nature as the planet can renew over the whole year. In 2000, Earth Overshoot Day arrived in late September. In 2017, the date arrived on August 2nd.<sup>10</sup> A body can only exert so much over time until the reserve energies for renewal begin to deplete. Without rest, without the regenerative powers of sabbath, a living organism is progressively stressed and drained to the point of unsustainable exhaustion.

*Anthropogenesis:* On the sixth day of creation, God creates human beings and charges them to represent God’s purposes for life as keepers of all God has made (Gen. 1:26-31). The overwhelming scientific consensus concerning the ecological crises we face is that they are *anthropogenic*, that is, they are caused by *we* human beings. Researchers speak in particular of a Great Acceleration<sup>11</sup> in charting the effect of human activity on the earth’s major life systems—including, for example, population growth, increased CO<sub>2</sub> levels, surface temperature rise, loss of tropical rainforests and woodlands, and depletion of fisheries—with the last sixty years representing an enormous acceleration of humanity’s impact on the natural world. Of course, “we” are not all equally culpable. The primary culprits and the chief beneficiaries of the Great Acceleration in the age of the Anthropocene have not been *all* human beings in general but predominantly wealthy, resource-intensive Northern, Western, European American producers and consumers, those who have been the least likely to suffer the negative effects of the earth’s degradation thus far. Inversely, those least responsible for environmental degradation—the world’s poor, from so called under-developed nations, whose skin colors are darker hued, including indigenous peoples, women, children, the elderly—have been and continue to be those suffering the worst effects.

*Biodiversity Collapse:* Before the creation of human beings in the Genesis account, God creates all other earth creatures, and on day five, the fish of the sea and birds of the air (Gen. 1:20-25). The world as knit together by God is an immensely biodiverse and intricately interwoven community of creation. Stated ecologically, we know that the well-being of any one member or species within a given habitat is dependent upon the health of the whole. The UN

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<sup>10</sup> Earth Overshoot Day. <http://www.overshootday.org/>, accessed September 12, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example Michael Gross, “Assessing Humanity’s Global Impact,” *Current Biology* 25, no. 4 (2015): 131–34.

Millennium Ecosystem Assessment reports that “the structure and function of the world’s ecosystems changed more rapidly in the second half of the twentieth century than at any time in human history,” resulting in a “substantial and largely irreversible loss in the diversity of life on Earth.”<sup>12</sup> The World Wildlife Fund released a study signaling that “the number of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish across the globe is, on average, about half the size it was 40 years ago.”<sup>13</sup> Biologist Norman Myers describes the rapid collapsing of global biodiversity as a “human-caused biotic holocaust,”<sup>14</sup> with the major causes being loss of habitat, overhunting and overfishing, climate change, and toxic pollution.

*Global Weirding:* The fourth day of creation points to the stable ordering of the earth’s systems with the rhythms of day and night and four consistent seasons of summer, fall, winter, spring (Gen. 1:14-19). Although the fluctuations of nature’s rhythms have always been relatively unpredictable throughout human history, still, there has been macro-level stability over the last ten thousand years, with consistent average temperature ranges and consistent bioregional patterns over that time. These are the rhythms that human beings have marked with seasonal celebrations and relied upon to grow food, and that wildlife have followed for migration or hibernation patterns. Several years ago, Hunter Lovins proposed that we replace the term “global warming” with “global weirding”<sup>15</sup> to communicate the reality that the result of a warming biosphere is not just a rise in average global temperatures but an amplification of the abnormal: more frequent and more severe super-storms, an increase in massive droughts and major flooding events, lightning strikes, wildfires, mudslides, and a significant change in the rhythm of the seasons. This is impacting everything from the earlier blooming of flowers and trees coupled with a disrupted timing of birds, bees, and butterflies for feeding and pollinating to the northward shifting of tree species, some at an astonishing rate per year.

*Biomic Degradation:* On the third day of creation, God separates the dry land from the seas and calls forth the emergence of vegetation, of trees in particular (Gen. 1:9-13). The scientific term for a large community of flora, fauna, and diverse ecosystems that make up a major habitat is a *biome*, and the ocean seas and forests are by far the most diverse and the most generative biomes on the planet. Forests are the dominant land ecosystem on Earth, accounting for about 75 percent of the gross primary productivity of the biosphere, and containing 80 percent of the earth’s total plant biomass. Two thirds of all plant and animal species live in the forest. Moreover, forests are a primary contributor to the production of oxygen, serve as one of the largest carbon sinks on the planet, regulate temperatures, provide food, oils, resins, spices, and medicines; forests create soil, and filter out dust and pollutants from the air.<sup>16</sup> And yet, half of the forests that once covered the earth are now gone. Most of the destruction has taken place over the

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted from Stephanie Mills, “Peak Nature?” in Richard Heinberg and Daniel Lerch, eds., *The Post Carbon Reader: Managing the 21st Century’s Sustainability Crises* (Santa Rosa, CA: Watershed Media, 2010), 106.

<sup>13</sup> Eliene Augenbraun. “Half the world’s wildlife gone over last 40 years.” CBSNEWS.com, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/world-wildlife-fund-wwf-half-the-worlds-biodiversity-gone-over-last-40-years/>, accessed on September 12, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted from Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 30.

<sup>15</sup> Angela Herring. “3Qs: What is ‘global weirding’?” PHYS.org, <https://phys.org/news/2012-03-3qs-global-weirding.html>, accessed September 12, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Fabio Rubio Scarano and Paula Ceotto, “Brazilian Atlantic forest: impact, vulnerability, and adaptation to climate change,” *Biodiversity and Conservation* 24, no. 9 (2015): 2319–31.

last century and a half, with the last fifty years representing, once again, an accelerated pace. The state of our oceans is similarly dire. Here, we can name the growing number and size of garbage patches in our oceans, the increasing problem of oceanic dead zones caused by agricultural runoff, the rapid depletion of marine life through overfishing, and the loss of the oceans coral reefs, with 90 percent of all reefs gravely threatened by 2030, and all by 2050.

*Climate Change:* On the second day, God separates the earth from the sky through the creation of a dome, a canopy, or what today we call the *atmosphere* (Gen. 1:6-8). The atmosphere is a layer of gases, the air that surrounds the planet, protects life by absorbing solar radiation, warms the surface through heat retention, and reduces temperature extremes between day and night. All of the fossil fuels we have been burning since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution go through a simple process in which the carbon released from burning mixes with oxygen to form carbon dioxide, which floats into the atmosphere, forming a kind of insulating blanket that increasingly traps more and more heat from the sun radiating off the earth that would otherwise be released into space.

United Methodist layperson Bill McKibben argues that we no longer live on the same planet that for the past ten thousand years has supported the rise of human civilization. For that whole period of time, he says, the temperature barely budged, averaging somewhere between fifty-eight and sixty degrees Fahrenheit worldwide. “But we no longer live on that planet,” McKibben says. “The world hasn’t ended, but the world as we know it has—even if we don’t quite know it yet.”<sup>17</sup> The number that McKibben points to is 350, or 350 parts of carbon dioxide per million. The level that produced the past ten thousand years of stability was 275 parts per million. Since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, that number has steadily risen each year. The world’s leading climatologists say that 350 parts per million is the number we can reach before we do irreparable harm to the biosphere. We are now around 400. “We can,” McKibben says, “if we’re very lucky and very committed, eventually get that number back down below 350,”<sup>18</sup> but to do so requires a massive, worldwide commitment to cut carbon emissions by significant amounts, immediately. Even if we do so, however, we’ve already created an enormous amount of damage. “We’re like the guy who smoked for forty years and then he had a stroke,” he says. Even if we were to completely stop smoking today, we’d be left with a side of our body that doesn’t work anymore.<sup>19</sup>

*Facing the Void:* In the beginning, on the first day of creation, the earth is a formless void, and the Spirit of God hovers over the face of the deep (Gen. 1:1-2). To look honestly and unflinchingly at the present condition of the earth and its degraded systems means facing into the unfathomable reality of a great undoing of the life-furthering goodness of God’s creation. Jürgen Moltmann states it directly:

The human ecosystem has lost its equilibrium and is on the way to the destruction of the earth and hence to its own destruction. The slowly spreading crisis is given the name “environmental pollution,” and people are seeking technological solutions for it. But in my view it is in actual fact a crisis of the whole total project of modern civilization. . . . Unless there is a fresh orientation of this society’s fundamental values, we shall not succeed in finding a new practice in our dealings with nature; unless human beings arrive at a new way of understanding themselves, and at an alternative economic system—then

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<sup>17</sup> Bill McKibben, “A New World” in *Post Carbon Reader: Managing the 21st Century’s Sustainability Crisis*, Ricard Heinberg and Daniel Lerch, eds. (Santa Rosa, CA: Post Carbon Institute, 2010), 44.

<sup>18</sup> McKibben, “A New World,” 48.

<sup>19</sup> McKibben, “A New World,” 49.

an ecological collapse of the earth can easily be extrapolated from the facts and trends of the present crises.<sup>20</sup>

The United Methodist Church cannot turn away from the causes and implications of these hard realities. Faithful witness to God’s mission for life must necessarily include, therefore, an ongoing, rigorous accounting of humanity’s sins—personal, institutional, and structural—against the goodness of the created world. In his still important book on prophetic imagination, Walter Brueggemann teaches that pain can be a necessary predecessor to hope, that mourning when embraced can lead to praise, and that lament, individual and communal, is the spiritual source of genuine prophetic action. “It is precisely those who know death most painfully who can speak hope most vigorously.”<sup>21</sup> The logic Brueggemann is affirming here is the scriptural logic of hope in God’s power for life over death. Hope, throughout the scriptures, is not rosy optimism. The witness of hope in the scriptures begins with a very hard realism: on the cross, in the tomb with a dead body, in exile by the waters of Babylon, in Egypt in bondage; it begins *ex nihilo* amidst the dark chaos covering the face of the deep. The purpose, then, of facing the terrible possibility of the “ecological collapse of the earth” is not to demoralize spirits or demotivate action. Quite the opposite, the purpose is to awaken the deep energies of new life that can only come by way of turning directly into the truth—about ourselves, about the world—and making ourselves open to the creative movements of God’s regenerating Spirit.

## Sustainability, Resilience, Regeneration

A growing number of scientists and environmentalists have arrived at a similar recognition of the unhelpful and even dangerous inadequacies of environmental frameworks that don’t take seriously the gravity of the earth’s threatened condition. The aim of *sustainability* has been the primary conceptual and strategic focus for most green movements, including within faith communities, since at least the 1960s, with the understanding that something is sustainable to the extent that it fosters the long-term continuation of a set or condition of present goods. One common definition of “sustainable development,” for example, is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”<sup>22</sup> Over the last decade and a half, the recognition that the world has already changed, quite drastically, and that even more disruptive changes are ahead, has led to the use of *resilience* as an orienting focus.

William Rees, professor in the School of Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia, better known as a co-ordinator of the “ecological footprint analysis,” defines *resilience* as “the capacity of a system to withstand disturbance while still retaining its fundamental structure, function, and internal feedbacks.”<sup>23</sup> More recently, *regeneration* has gained prominence among ecological design theorists, permaculturalists, and related holistic systems thinkers. They contend that interventional strategies for the restoration, rehabilitation, and renewal of severely damaged bio-systems provide our best and perhaps only hope for the sustainment of planetary conditions supportive of diverse life forms, including

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<sup>20</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 133.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 67.

<sup>22</sup> International Institute for Sustainable Development, IISD.org, <http://www.iisd.org/topic/sustainable-development>, accessed September 15, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> William E. Rees, “Thinking ‘Resilience,’” in *Post Carbon Reader*, 27.

human beings. “We are beginning to understand that we will all lose in the mid to long term” if we fail not only to maintain but “to regenerate the healthy functioning of ecosystems,” Daniel Christian Wahl writes. “The creation of diverse, regenerative cultures collaboratively united in a regenerative civilization is the only viable future open to us as we move into the ‘planetary era.’”<sup>24</sup> Ben Falk states it more directly: “Our goal as participants in the land must be to do better than ‘less harm.’ Why focus only on doing less bad when we can actually improve, actually regenerate?”<sup>25</sup>

## Hope in God for New Life

The charge to do no harm, to do good, and to actively participate in the means of new life ought to be a familiar one to us United Methodists. In a time of widespread denial about climate change and other ecological crises, on the one hand, and a growing despair about just how overwhelming the problems are, on the other—both resulting in inaction—the Wesleyan Methodist tradition contains vital resources capable of supporting both a rigorous accounting of sin *and* an abiding trust in God’s powers for regeneration in the midst of death. In the face of so much harm, what ought we to hope for? Can we be saved from sin, liberated from what binds us, and transformed ever more deeply into the life that is abundant? Is there any hope for the good earth?

The enduring Wesleyan Methodist response of a deep assurance in the saving powers of God to effect rebirth and growth in holiness may appear as foolish and unrealistic to some today as it always has to Methodism’s detractors. Although we United Methodists need to guard against the danger of not taking the realities of sin and evil seriously enough, I believe there is an equally dangerous possibility that we as a denomination would fail to embrace and enact our most distinctive charism—at just this point in time, with so much at stake—of an active faith in God’s ever-present and comprehensive mission for life’s renewal, restoration, and ultimate flourishing. Before examining concrete ways United Methodists are already engaging in and might further contribute to global regeneration, I want briefly to situate this missional vision in John Wesley’s holistic understanding of salvation.

Scholar Randy Maddox has written extensively on Wesley’s understanding of salvation as holistic. In an essay titled, “Reclaiming Holistic Salvation: A Continuing Wesleyan Agenda,”<sup>26</sup> Maddox summarizes Wesley’s mature affirmations concerning the breadth and depth of God’s saving work. Rooted in his interpretation of the scriptures, his reading of the tradition, and a lifetime of pastoral ministry, Wesley, Maddox says, came to see salvation as encompassing:

*Rational Assent and Responsive Trust:* The change God effects through faith is rooted not only in intellectual assent to a set of doctrinal propositions but, even more, includes the affective transformation of the whole person through lived experiences of divine grace and love.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Daniel Christian Wahl, *Designing Regenerative Cultures* (Axminster, England: Triarchy Press, 2016), 1, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Ben Falk, *The Resilient Farm and Homestead: An Innovative Permaculture and Whole Systems Design Approach* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2013), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Randy Maddox, “Reclaiming Holistic Salvation: A Continuing Wesleyan Agenda,” in *Holy Imagination: Thinking About Social Holiness*, eds. Nathan Crawford, Jonathan Dohrill, and David Wilson (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Maddox, “Reclaiming Holistic Salvation,” 42–44.

*Forgiveness and Spiritual Transformation:* God's grace in Christ works not just to forgive us from sin and deliver us from future condemnation but also to renew and grow in us already now the Spirit-empowered capacities to love God truly and all humankind fully in the whole of life.<sup>28</sup>

*Individuals and Society:* The holiness of heart and life God brings about within persons takes place through small communities of intimate knowledge and mutual support and extends to include the progressive transformation of society and social systems at large.<sup>29</sup>

*Souls and Bodies:* God's loving grace nurtures the renewal and restoration of both spiritual health and physical well-being in the salvific healing of whole persons.<sup>30</sup>

*Humans and the Whole of Creation:* The gift, process, and scope of salvation include new birth for human beings in all of their relationships and the ultimate restoration to life for the whole of creation, including for animals.<sup>31</sup>

To believe in the promise of salvation, from a Wesleyan perspective, is to trust in God's regenerative powers in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to restore in human beings the affective, physical, intellectual, spiritual, and social capacities to love God, others, and the whole of creation. This is still the central question for we United Methodists: Are we going on to perfection, on to holiness, on to loving wholeness in the whole of life? In an age of biospheric crisis, my hope and prayer is that we will respond—not for the sake of institutional preservation or insular purity but in faithfulness to God's mission for life—with an emboldened “Yes, for we are yet alive!” I propose the following forms of holiness for United Methodists committed to regenerative mission.

## Missioners of Regenerative Action

*Personal Holiness:* Those who come to so love the earth that they actively sustain, protect, and seek to renew it do not love the creation abstractly. In most every case, they are those who have experienced directly and intimately the beauty, mystery, and inherent goodness of particular places. Sallie McFague has long pleaded with Christians to turn attention to the natural world, as a form of prayer, and “to love it, in all its difference and detail, in itself, for itself.” Although we are certainly called, she says, to love the whole world, “no one loves the whole earth except as she or he loves a particular [place within] it.” For “it is hard to care for the earth if one has never cared for [any part] of it.”<sup>32</sup> Drawing on Wesley's recognition of the importance of personal, affective experiences of God's grace in prompting new birth, we ought similarly to affirm the significance of cultivating direct encounters with the grace-filled goodness (*tov*) of the non-human natural world. We might remember here that Wesley spent a good part of his life and ministry on horseback riding through the English countryside, that he was conversant with the natural sciences of his day, and that he engaged in a life-long study of nature.<sup>33</sup> For United Methodist Christians seeking to grow in ecological holiness, then, one starting point would be to attend prayerfully over time to a particular place, a plant, a creature, an ecosystem, and so on,

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<sup>28</sup> Maddox, “Reclaiming Holistic Salvation,” 44–47.

<sup>29</sup> Maddox, “Reclaiming Holistic Salvation,” 47–49.

<sup>30</sup> Maddox, “Reclaiming Holistic Salvation,” 49–51.

<sup>31</sup> Maddox, “Reclaiming Holistic Salvation,” 51–53.

<sup>32</sup> Sally McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997), 27, 43.

<sup>33</sup> See Randy Maddox, “John Wesley's Precedent for Theological Engagement with the Natural Sciences,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 23–54.



carefully observing and learning about the unique goodness of the life or lives present. How does this plant live? What does this habitat need to flourish? How does this creature change with the seasons? What does this unique part of the creation reveal about the Creator? What are the causes of degradation, past and present, that diminish life here? What kind of interventions will support regeneration? My hope is that United Methodists would come to be recognized for our loving care of healed spaces, creatures, and natural systems, which give witness themselves in a myriad of ways to the gracious energies of God's abundant life.

*Household Holiness:* A recent study estimated that environmental pressures arising from households worldwide contribute more than 60 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions and between 50 percent and 80 percent of total land, material, and water use.<sup>34</sup> The study notes that household footprints are unevenly distributed across regions, with wealthier countries generating far more detrimental impacts per capita. Moreover, it is crucial to situate data of this sort within the broader context of a growth-oriented, exploitative, and extractive global economy. Still, a widespread conversion at the domestic level to environmentally holy/healthy lifestyles would make an immense difference, both materially and symbolically, in the great work of building up a regenerative culture. Here, we United Methodists ought to be retrieving and repurposing Wesley's three injunctions from his "The Use of Money" sermon, each of which sets forth a kind of household holiness.

Wesley's first instruction to "earn all you can" is qualified by the provision that "we ought not to gain money at the expense of life," which he specifies as any work that is harmful to one's body or mind or is hurtful to another.<sup>35</sup> The second instruction, to "save all you can," includes wasting no part of one's resources "in curiously adorning your houses in superfluous or expensive furniture; in costly pictures, painting, gilding, books; in elegant (rather than useful) gardens."<sup>36</sup> Finally, after earning and saving all you can, the Methodist ought to "give all you can" for the good of those who suffer in need.<sup>37</sup>

The scriptural holiness Wesley hoped would spread across the land was by no means limited to a strictly inward sanctity but involved the going on to perfection in relation to such things as livelihood, material possessions, the use of resources, consumption, and home-making. Wesley's heirs today ought to be active participants and leaders in the ecological economics movement, supporting the growth of simple living and carbon-neutral lifestyles, Fair Trade goods, economic cooperatives, living-local economies, transition town initiatives, sustainable agriculture, triple bottom line businesses, socially and ecologically responsible investments, and much more.

*Congregational Holiness:* Wesley believed that the "the gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness, but social holiness."<sup>38</sup> This belief came from his convictions: first—that the gift of new life and ongoing growth in sanctification are dependent upon the grace of God received in and through the preaching, teaching, encouragement, and accountability provided by the ecclesial community; and second—that the goal of Christian living is to be perfectly related to God, neighbor, and the creation in love. In other words, Wesley believed that both the means and the end of the Christian life are social. The ecclesial structures of the early Methodist movement, including the conferences, societies, class meetings, and bands, should be

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<sup>34</sup> Diana Ivanova et al., *Environmental Impact Assessment of Household Consumption*, 18 December 2015, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jiec.12371/full>.

<sup>35</sup> John Wesley, "The Use of Money," *Works* 2: I.1–8.

<sup>36</sup> Wesley, "The Use of Money," II.1–8.

<sup>37</sup> Wesley, "The Use of Money," II.2.

<sup>38</sup> Preface, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, *Works* [Jackson] 14:321.

viewed in this way—as both the means of receiving the relational love of God and the actual manifestation of social holiness in this life.

Many of our churches have already started up earth-care teams to promote the greening of congregational life, including, for example, completing energy audits of their church buildings, adding solar panels to sanctuary roofs, changing to geothermal systems for heating and cooling, tending church community gardens connecting them to surrounding neighborhoods, overseeing recycling, waste, and composting systems, working with pastoral staff to incorporate creation care and ecological justice themes into worship prayers and liturgies and sermons, and more. We might also imagine the role Wesleyan systems of accountability could play in fostering lives of holy regeneration, with United Methodists asking one another: How is it with your soul? And then, how is it with your body? How is it with the soil health in your vegetable garden? Do you need any help with your fruit orchard? How is it with your carpooling and public transportation? Better yet, how is it with your bicycle? Are you conserving water? Or maybe, how is it with your purchasing habits? Do you know the environmental and social impacts of the products you use? Is your daily work, how you make a living, conducive to the love of God and neighbor? Does it do no harm to the earth? Does it do good, especially for the sake of the poor? Are you politically engaged on issues of climate justice? In addition to other needed strategies, United Methodists can contribute to the rapid spread of regenerative lifestyles and ultimately social-cultural systems by practicing anew the watching over one another—and the good earth—in love.

*Bioregional Holiness:* From an ecological perspective, we know that the flows and cycles of life within the biosphere organize, not just at the local and global levels, but also within the intermediate levels of eco-zones, bioregions, ecoregions, and ecosystems. These are geographically defined areas marked by distinctive assemblies of soil and mineral composition, water flows, landforms, plant and animal life, climactic and weather patterns, migration rhythms, and more. A growing number of Christians, rooted in this awareness, are beginning to speak of “watershed discipleship” to shift regenerative vision and practice to this intermediate level. Congregational care is expanded here to attend to the well-being of the regional life systems within which church ministries are embedded and on which life there is sustained. This includes learning about the native species and wildlife of an area, the major geologic events, native trees, unique weather patterns, as well as tracking the health of the rivers, streams, lakes, and aquifers, and just important, understanding how all of these and more are interwoven as an organic whole—all for the sake of participating in the ecological regeneration of life in that region. A bioregional perspective is also a helpful frame in which to address issues of environmental injustice, by focusing the regenerative and justice-seeking energies of discipleship upon socio-ecological sites of degradation in area neighborhoods, cities, and counties.

Among the resources United Methodism might contribute to the “great transition” is the structure of a connectional system well suited to regenerative ministries within particular bioregions. The differentiated yet interconnected purviews of local churches, districts, annual conferences, jurisdictions, and the general church are set up to enable United Methodists to foster socio-ecological regeneration at the local, global, and regional levels of missional engagement. To give just one present example, in the North Central Jurisdiction alone, there are now three conference-wide ecological initiatives: Hopeful Earthkeepers of the Minnesota Annual

Conference,<sup>39</sup> the Creation Care Alliance of the Indiana Conference,<sup>40</sup> and the Northern Illinois Conference Bishop's Task Force on Sustainability.<sup>41</sup>

*Denominational Holiness:* The missional tasks involved in (1) critically understanding and constructively responding to the biospheric crises we face, (2) connecting them to the related emergencies of racism, economic injustice, militarism, violence against women and children, threats to democracy, social unrest, and more, while simultaneously (3) grounding the church's analysis and action in our core denominational mission are enormous and highly complex. In this sense, neither congregationalism nor regionalism, by themselves, are equipped to address the systemic ties linking an increase in natural disasters, the dismantling of governmental services aimed at the common good—the rise of white supremacist hate groups, the decimation of rural communities and landscapes, spiritual and cultural malaise, and the influence of the fossil fuel industry on federal legislation, for example. Here is where the resources of the general church—our boards, agencies, organizations, theological schools, colleges and universities, polity, and so on—are indispensable to the missional aim of creating disciples equipped to effect transformational, regenerative change for the sake of the *world* as an interconnected whole.

Denominationally, this work is already richly reflected in the resources of our Social Principles, statements in the *Book of Resolutions* on stewardship, environmental racism, energy, water, and farmworker justice, the Bishops' Pastoral Letter and Initiative "*God's Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and Action*,"<sup>42</sup> materials on environmental justice from GBCS,<sup>43</sup> the United Methodist Women's missional study "*Climate Justice: A Call to Hope and Action*,"<sup>44</sup> eco-theological courses and programmatic initiatives at most of our seminaries and divinity schools, and more. Last fall, a new denominational center for Mission Innovation launched a United Methodist Earthkeepers Program,<sup>45</sup> with the intent of commissioning up to five hundred lay and clergy missionaries for God's creation to work in local communities to bring about ecological justice and renewal. In each case, the general church is offering vital organizational, educational, and formational resources that local churches are simply not equipped to produce alone. The faithful contribution of United Methodism to global ecological regeneration in our time and for future generations will require even greater—and certainly not less—unity of purpose, intersectional moral thinking, organizational collaboration, collective impact, and institutional leadership from the connectional structures of the general church.

*Social-Political Holiness:* Finally, a holistic discipleship committed to the salvific regeneration of the earth God so loves will necessarily engage and seek to transform political, economic, and cultural systems at the broadest levels of policy, law, governance, and public opinion. A missional church oriented toward the new creation must be a public church committed to the flourishing of the common good, including that of our common planetary home. Historically, Wesleyan Methodists have been at the heart of many of the great movements for social justice in the United States: the abolition of slavery, fair labor laws, civil rights, women's equality, and disarmament, to name just a few.

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<sup>39</sup> See <http://www.minnesotaumc.org/hopefulearth>.

<sup>40</sup> See <http://www.creationcareallianceinumc.org/>.

<sup>41</sup> See appendix 1, Timothy Eberhart, "An Ecological Affirmation of the Northern Illinois Conference of The United Methodist Church," commissioned by the Bishop's Sustainability Taskforce, January 2016.

<sup>42</sup> See <http://hopeandaction.org/main/>.

<sup>43</sup> See <https://www.umcjustice.org/what-we-care-about/environmental-justice>.

<sup>44</sup> See <https://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/mission-u/climate>.

<sup>45</sup> See <https://www.umccreationcare.org/>.

Today, in relation to the urgency of the biospheric emergencies we're facing and the need to participate in the upbuilding of regenerative systems at every level of society, the pursuit of holiness in the whole of life will include at least the following. First, United Methodists are called to *faithful resistance* wherever the earth is degraded, the poor are exploited and oppressed, and the common good threatened. Inspired by Wesley's courage to bring the good news directly into public squares, this may take the form of direct action, civil disobedience, public marches, nonviolent disobedience, boycotts, and more. Second, the times call for *faithful resilience* in the face of global ecological destabilization. Many of the most promising developments in the environmental movement are occurring at the municipal level: from climate action plans to urban farming to green building codes to green mortgages to habitat restoration to community-owned renewable-energy projects. As climate related disruptions increase in frequency and intensity, this is regenerative work for United Methodist missionaries. Finally, United Methodists are called today to participate in the *faithful reformation* of the economic, political, and cultural systems responsible for biocide. This will include the spread of holiness through political advocacy, voter drives, letter campaigns, running for office, political party-platform building, joining and supporting environmental organizations like McKibben's 350.org, and contributing to the work of groups like The Next System Project<sup>46</sup> and The New Economy Coalition.<sup>47</sup> A global ecological conversion significant enough to bring about global biospheric regeneration will require mass grassroots organization, broad institutional commitment, and systemic political-economic change. United Methodists are called to share in this holy work.

## Conclusion

An increasing number of scientists, acutely aware of our biospheric condition, are turning to the world's religions for resources of moral leadership, communal strength, and spiritual hope. Partha Dasgupta of Cambridge University and Veerabadrhan Ramanathan of the University of California write that "finding ways to develop a sustainable relationship with nature requires not only engagement of scientists and political leaders, but also moral leadership that religious institutions are in a position to offer."<sup>48</sup> In a separate article, Ramanathan writes that "eight decades of research . . . on the natural and social science aspects of environmental changes has led us to the doorsteps of moral leaders of religions to rescue humanity from climate change."<sup>49</sup> I am confident The United Methodist Church has a great deal to contribute, along with other religious traditions, to the great work of planetary healing. Among the Protestant traditions, in particular, I believe Wesleyan Methodism's distinctive grounding in a deep trust in God's saving power to liberate sinners, to heal us from the effects of our sin, and to renew us *and* the whole of creation in love is desperately needed. We United Methodists bear a distinctive charism we can and ought to offer in missional engagement for the healing of the world God so loves.

## Appendix

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<sup>46</sup> <https://thenextsystem.org/>.

<sup>47</sup> <https://neweconomy.net/>.

<sup>48</sup> Partha Dasgupta and Veerabadrhan Ramanathan, "Pursuit of the Common Good," *Science* (Sept. 19, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> Veerabadrhan Ramanathan, "An Appeal from Science Leaders to Religious Leaders on Environmental Protection," *Scripps Institution of Oceanography* (Sept. 18, 2014).

## **“An Ecological Affirmation of the Northern Illinois Conference of The United Methodist Church,” Bishop’s Sustainability Taskforce, January 2016**

As followers of Jesus Christ seeking the transformation of the world through the resurrecting power of the Holy Spirit, we are committed to the healing of the earth and its many creatures and biosystems, of which human beings are a part, as we strive in hope for the earthly fulfillment of God’s reign of righteousness and justice.

With the scriptures, we believe that “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” (Psalm 24:1). The New Testament witnesses to the reconciling ministry of Christ in whom “all things” in heaven and on earth are held together in peace (Colossians 1:15-20). God’s own Spirit, the source of life, groans through the whole of creation in eager longing for redemption (Romans 8:22). We affirm, therefore, that the vocation given by God to humans to “till and keep” the garden of creation (Genesis 2:15) is a call not to “dominion” (Genesis 1:28) understood as domination but dominion lived out in loving stewardship of the good earth in anticipation of the coming new creation of “all things” (Revelation 21:5).

As heirs of John Wesley, we embrace anew the call to holy living—the loving of God, neighbor, and all creatures—in the whole of life. We acknowledge the interconnectedness of ecological well-being with social justice for all, heeding both the warnings from the scientific community regarding environmental degradation and the cries of the poor and oppressed for political, economic, and cultural equality. Amidst the ecological crises of a changing climate, biodiversity loss, and more, we know that it is the “least of these” (Matthew 25:40) who are already suffering the worst effects. The going on to Christian perfection today, then, includes an ever deepening and expanding growth in holiness expressed through concrete acts of personal conversion, congregational mission, and public transformation.

As members of the Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church, we thus accept the freedom God gives us not only to resist environmental harm but also to walk in the life-giving ways of Jesus as “first fruits” (James 1:18) of the earth’s renewal. Toward this end, we are dedicated to 1) greening our congregational properties and practices, 2) enacting ministries of ecological education and formation for children, youth, and adults, 3) serving others in missions that integrate social outreach with environmental health, and 4) engaging in public advocacy alongside other communities of faith and good will for the sake of our common planetary home.