Sustainable Community Development: The Churches’ Stake

Our churches are working to preserve both the community and the environment

BY EARL ARNOLD

“Sustainable development” has become one of the watchwords of those concerned with environmental policy. Using the term indicates a concern for the natural environment without espousing the preservationist position that there should be no change from the “pristine” natural state of the region — or at least, no further change from its current state. A sustainable pattern of development is one that allows — indeed, promotes — the use of land and other natural resources to provide for human needs, but in such a way that can be continued from generation to generation without degrading the environment or exhausting the resource. Whether or not sustainable development is possible, within the Adirondacks or elsewhere, it is a worthy goal to strive for.

Adding the word “community” in the title of this article draws attention to the corporate dimension of development and the decisions that shape it. Although private companies and government entities are often seen as the primary instruments of development, sustainable or otherwise, it is the active involvement of local communities that offers a realistic hope that development can be shaped so as to meet real human needs, both for the current generation and for generations to come.

What many people find puzzling, though, is why the Christian church should have a concern for sustainable development. Among both members of congregations and persons with little or no contact with any Christian church,

there is a widespread perception that the Christian faith is purely a spiritual matter, and does not (or should not) concern itself with such mundane issues as community development or the future of the natural world. The obvious political and economic dimensions of these issues would seem, on the surface, to make them unlikely to receive much attention from groups like Christian churches, that are “above all that.”

This article attempts to indicate that, indeed, Christian churches in America have a concern for sustainable development, and to explore how churches in the Adirondack region, in particular, might foster that concern and apply it to address the needs of the region.

Christian Concern for Creation

An understanding of the world as God’s good creation is the basis for Christian concern about the state of the environment. According to the biblical story in Genesis, God examined the world at each step during its creation and declared that it was “good.” At the end of the first creation account, in the first chapter of Genesis, God looked at all that God had created, and declared, “behold, it was very good.” The creation story in the next chapter depicts the human as placed by God in the garden, in the midst of God’s creation, as the gardener, “to till it and keep it.” As Christians understand the natural world as God’s good gift, to supply the needs of humans and God’s other creatures generation after generation, they adopt an attitude of care and respect for the environment. After all, who are we, to degrade and destroy what God has so lovingly and carefully created?

Many people have seen the underlying justification of western civilization’s destructive impact on the environment in the verse in the first chapter of Genesis in which God blesses the newly created humans: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over . . . every thing that moves upon the earth.” And indeed, both the burgeoning human population and the careless attitude many humans exhibit toward the natural environment might be traced to this passage. However, the Biblical conception of “dominion” does not include “destruction,” and its accounts of misrule by unscrupulous leaders are filled with condemnation of those who misuse their authority in such a way as brings harm to their subjects. Furthermore, the relationship between humans and nature depicted in the second chapter quite contradicts such an exploitative understanding, as indicated above.

Much has been written in recent years about the theological basis for Christian concern for the natural world. Adirondack author Bill McKibben summarizes it as well as any: “God, who after all had gone to the trouble of creating myriad species and who called them ‘good,’ did not understand dominion to include thoughtless destruction for short term gain.”

A deeper understanding of faith in God as Creator can lead to a fuller rationale for our care and concern for the natural environment. The anthropocentric world view that informs most of our everyday thoughts and actions — and that authorizes us to treat the natural world as merely a treasurehouse to be
plundered to satisfy human desires — is challenged when we consider the world from the standpoint of the Creator of all. As our minds begin to grasp the vastness of creation and the astounding variety of God’s creatures, we gain a deep humility about our own position in the scheme of things. McKibben sees this as a major lesson to be drawn from God’s “voice from the whirlwind” speech in the biblical book of Job. If we are more humble in our attitude toward God’s creation, we will learn to live more lightly on the earth.

The theological impetus toward sustainability has also a more positive thrust in the attitude of joyous appreciation for creation, expressed particularly forcefully in Psalm 104. This great hymn, praising God in the glory of creation, affirms that we, too, share the joy that God experienced in viewing what the divine hand has made. To know that joy is to treasure the natural world and to be concerned to preserve it from destruction. Most residents of the Adirondacks have known something of this joy and can appreciate the transcendent value of nature for its own sake, not merely as a means for supplying human wants.

**Concern for the Underprivileged**

The Bible consistently portrays God as protector of the poor and the weak, of those who have neither the wealth nor the power to assure that their needs are met. The Christian church has regularly expressed this Divine concern for the underprivileged by providing material assistance to those in need and by advocating for them in the counsels of society. For several decades, promoting development has been one of the chief ways that American churches and church bodies have addressed poverty. Church agencies such as the Roman Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the United Methodist Shalom Zones initiative and the Self Development of People program of the Presbyterian Church have provided technical support and financial resources for local groups in this country and overseas to undertake economic development. Heifer Project International, which provides gifts of breeding livestock to promote economic development in agricultural communities, has for decades been a favorite mission project for Sunday school classes and church groups of all denominations.

Churches have also been involved in addressing the underlying social causes of poverty. As church members work to relieve the suffering of the poor, either in person or through church agencies, they often come to ask the question “Why? Why do these people lack food, clothing and shelter? Why can they not provide for their own needs?” Often, they discover a need for social policies and physical infrastructure to support development, beyond the capacity of church resources to provide. Working locally or through denominational or interdenominational groups like Bread for the World, church members have become effective advocates for the underprivileged, obtaining resources from governments and other social agencies for development projects across the country and around the world.

Addressing structural poverty among their own members, churches have also acted as vehicles for underprivileged people to organize their efforts to improve their own situation. Churches have an advantage in playing this role, in that they are locally based organizations, in direct contact with the lives and problems of the people in the area. Thus they generally have more credibility with the poor than would an outside advocacy group. By mobilizing public awareness and sympathy, locally or nation wide, and by appealing to the conscience of those in power, churches have often been very effective in catalyzing social and political changes that improve the situation of the underprivileged and promote development in depressed areas.

**Holding the Two Together**

There is a direct link between poverty and environmental degradation. As the environment is destroyed, through pollution, deforestation, or soil erosion, for example, fewer resources are available to support the human population, and the quality of life drops. As poverty increases,
pressure to exploit the remaining resources rises, accelerating destruction of the environment. Cheaper factories are built with fewer pollution controls, younger trees are cut down, and marginal farmland on steeper slopes is plowed to provide more food, accelerating the destructive spiral. Unless steps are taken to address the poverty endemic in such communities, attempts to preserve and restore the natural environment without resorting to harshly oppressive measures will be futile.

This cycle of poverty and environmental destruction has a particularly damaging impact on some of the groups of people that are widely represented among residents of the Adirondacks. Poor households, women and children, landless rural households, and small landowners are most vulnerable to these forces.

Unfortunately, advocates for preserving the natural world and proponents of economic development to meet human need have most often viewed each other as antagonists. The environmentalist position is often viewed as merely "preservationist," and has sometimes hardened into such, insisting on maintaining an area in its pristine natural state and prohibiting human use of its resources. The Adirondack Park Agency is often viewed, in the eyes of many Adirondack residents, as representing this position.

In contrast, advocates of economic development and growth are frequently understood as trying to justify maximum exploitation of the area's resources to satisfy present needs and wants, without regard for the impact on the environment and its ability to provide the means to meet future needs. Sometimes, businesses and communities act in this way, with catastrophic results. Pressure to find arable land to grow food and firewood to cook it, for example, has caused widespread deforestation and desertification in many parts of the world. Stripping away the vegetation exposes the earth to erosion and changes local weather patterns, further reducing the ability of the land to support its human population, not to mention destroying habitats for many other plant and animal species.

A strategy to address the needs of areas of chronic poverty (like many parts of the Adirondacks) cannot succeed without careful attention to environmental concerns, for beyond a certain intensity of use, natural systems cannot support increased exploitation, human or otherwise, but will suffer degradation and reduction of their carrying capacity. At the same time, any attempt to reduce or ameliorate human damage to the natural environment will fail unless legitimate human needs are also addressed, for present privation and need are powerful forces toward more intensive use of the area's limited resources, without regard for the future.

**Opportunities in the Adirondacks**

Since the emergence of environmental awareness in the public consciousness several decades ago, church bodies have played important roles in shaping our culture's attitudes toward the natural world. Although many congregations have not yet responded to the theological imperatives to respect and preserve God's creation or have not made the connection between the poverty in their community and threats to the natural environment of their area, still Christian churches offer one of the best institutional bases for proposing and supporting sustainable development. In the Adirondacks, only a few communities have environmental organizations, economic development councils, or even Chambers of Commerce, but every community can boast one or more churches. If the potential inherent in these congregations to advocate and work for sustainable development could be realized across the Adirondack region, great steps could be taken to improve the lives of Adirondack residents while preserving the unique natural environment of the area.

Two recent conferences sponsored by the Adirondack Interfaith Planning Committee have addressed sustainable development in the area. Late in February 1995, 75 participants gathered in the Hotel Saranac in Saranac Lake for a two day event, "The Adirondacks: In Search of Common Ground." The goal of this con-
ference was to identify elements of a vision for the future of the region that is shared by church people, environmentalists, and representatives of businesses and local governments. Two years later, a smaller group of 35 met for one day in April 1997 at Saranac Lake's North Country Community College for a conference on "The Adirondacks: Next Steps." At this event, representatives of church-sponsored development programs presented models for development that might be applied in Adirondack communities, with assistance and support from national church agencies.

One of the goals that came out of the 1995 conference was to establish a network among churches of the Adirondacks, to help them share information about sustainable development, and resource and encourage one another in undertaking development projects in their communities. Persons interested in pursuing this vision or finding out about current church projects in the Adirondack region can contact the Adirondack Interfaith Planning Committee through Prof. Julius Archibald, 90 Park Avenue, Plattsburgh, NY 12901.

For Further Information

In addition to the books and articles already cited, the following recent materials will be rewarding reading for members of churches and for those interested in the churches' role in sustainable development.

- **Creation at Risk? Religion, Science, and Environmentalism**, Michael Cromartie, ed., Ethics and Public Policy Center, Wash., D.C., 1995 (A series of provocative articles and responses challenging accepted wisdom about environmental concerns and the religious reaction to them.)

- **Ecotheology: Voices from South and North**, David G. Hallman, ed., Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1994 (A broad collection of Biblical and theological viewpoints about environmental concerns, including particularly the viewpoints of excluded groups and indigenous peoples.)


- **With Roots and Wings: Christianity in an Age of Ecology and Dialogue**, Jay B. McDaniel, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1995 (A presentation of Biblical and theological roots of environmental concern, with attention given to the viewpoints of other religions.)


- Congregations wishing to explore ways to express their concern that development in the Adirondacks (or elsewhere) be undertaken in a sustainable way might consider becoming part of the "Environmental Justice Covenant Congregation Program" of the National Council of Churches of Christ. Further information, as well as a listing of study and action resources for use by individuals and churches, is available from Environmental Justice Resources, National Council of Churches, P. O. Box 968, Elkhart, IN 46515, or can be ordered by calling 1 800 762 0968.

Endnotes


5 Ibid., p. 42f.

