

REFORMING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION To Meet the Environmental Challenge

The massive patterns of eco-injustice that misshape our near future are historically unique, demanding a response. This situation requires a reshaping of theological education to meet the environmental challenge. Such education should be redesigned to explore and foster experiences, beliefs and actions consistent with “a vision in which all forms of life have their place and receive respect and care.”¹ Theological schools and religion departments can join in this “great work” (Thomas Berry’s term) by intentionally inspiring and equipping students to become more earth-friendly, justice-seeking, community-sustaining religious leaders.

Theological Education to Meet the Environmental Challenge (TEMEC) was a special project designed to foster real movement in that direction. Over a 12-year period, the Program on Ecology, Justice and Faith (PEJF), that I directed, and the Center for Respect of Life and Environment (CRLE), directed by Richard (Rick) Clugston, teamed up to foster theological education / religious studies focusing on eco-justice – i.e. the quest for ecological sustainability in linkage with socio-economic justice. (N.B. It’s a double “eco”.) Our activity through this deeply ecumenical project focusing on reform of theological and religious studies expressed the commitment of the eco-justice movement² to serve earth community and its most vulnerable inhabitants of everykind.

Below is a summary of what we did and lessons we learned in this endeavor.

What TEMEC Did

With program funds raised from the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts, and with CRLE’s in-kind administrative support, TEMEC engaged key professors at engaged schools to co-plan and host **eight major conferences** across the U.S. Our conferences attracted the participation of nearly 1,000 faculty, students, clergy, and lay religious leaders, plus a few theological school administrators from across North America. (Six of these major professional development conferences were hosted by and co-planned with “Lead Institutions,” about which I say more below.) The conferences occurred at Stony Point, NY, Chicago, IL (2), Dubuque, IA, Seattle, WA, Claremont CA, Union, NYC, & Washington, DC.

Several of these conferences concentrated on particular subjects: e.g., state of the art research in particular theological fields of study, rural and urban eco-justice ministry, educational method (pedagogy) to enhance human-earth relations, earth friendly liturgy, sustainable practices, faith-based public policy advocacy for a green future, and earthier ecclesiology (what it means to be the church ecologically reformed).

¹ Roger Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism & the Planet’s Future* (Oxford, 2006) 169.

² The rise of the eco-justice movement in the early 1970s paralleled the emergence of sustainability as an ethical concern. Ethical emphases of both movements meet in focusing on just and sustainable community.

We also teamed up with the Earth Charter Initiative to involve interested members of our growing theological educators' network in two international seminars: one on The Earth Charter and the Ecumenical Movement, held at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute in Switzerland, and the other on Earth Charter Ethics, held at Pocantico Conference Center, NY. We also co-sponsored some other major conferences in Toronto and in the Boston area. And, on behalf of TEMEC, I participated in a gathering of evangelical environmental studies professors at Gordon College, MA, and a conference of Roman Catholic religion professors held in Portland, OR. Yes, we got around, resourced quite a few educators (while learning from them), fostered linkages, and produced **five books**:

Ecology, Justice and Christian Faith: A Critical Guide to the Literature, by Peter Bakken, Joan Gibb Engel & J. Ronald Engel³ (Greenwood Press, 1995);

Theology for Earth Community: A Field Guide (Orbis, 1996), ed. D. Hessel;

"The Ethics of Population, Consumption, and Environment: Essays and Cases, *Theology and Public Policy*, Vol 8, 1 & 2 (1996), ed. James Nash;

Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans (Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000), eds. D. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether;⁴

Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response (Fortress, 2001), eds. D. Hessel and Larry Rasmussen.

A significant proportion of the professors and graduate students who came to the initial Stony Point conference were stimulated to pursue teaching and research in theology, ethics, and ministry to meet the environmental challenge. We highlighted the importance of studying courses across the theological disciplines, and doing field education or internships, concentrating on eco-justice and care for creation. Thus we encouraged a new generation of graduate students to do scholarly research and teaching in this subject area. And we supported a cadre of interested schools to engage, at least for awhile, with some continuing effect. In the words of one participant, TEMEC helped to create the conditions for movement toward theological education focused on earth community.

But did Theological Education move much beyond Business as Usual?

Along with the conference program summarized above, TEMEC pursued a **modestly funded, innovative strategy of working with Lead Institutions**. By offering small grants and technical support, we persuaded some creative, interested faculty in a few theological schools and religion departments -- among the 1500 that exist in North

³ J. Ronald Engel, Prof. of Social Ethics at Meadville/Lombard Theological School (Chicago), contributed in a crucial way to formation of the Program on Ecology, Justice and Faith and to shaping the aims of TEMEC. The Engel-Bakken bibliography's opening critical survey of the struggle to integrate ecology, justice and faith articulates the eco-justice vision and values that ought to guide theological educators.

⁴ This volume, resulting from a 1998 conference on Christianity and Ecology in Cambridge, MA, is part of the world religions and ecology series funded and facilitated by the Forum on Religion and Ecology.

America -- to take the lead by committing to **three aspects of education for just and sustainable community**:

- To give eco-justice themes and issues cross-disciplinary attention at the curriculum's core (encouraging both praxis-based learning and offering eco-aware core courses);
- To embody just, sustainable, humane community in campus operations including energy conservation, grounds keeping, recycling, purchasing of food and products, reexamining investments, and other institutional habits. (Campus-based initiatives need to foster community lifestyle changes that really matter, while avoiding green Pharisaim);
- To join the global, regional and local struggle for sustainable community by acting in the public arena (partnering with engaged NGO's and participating in larger eco-justice networks to express spirited earth citizenship).

[Case examples of what four lead institutions associated with TEMEC did early on to move in this direction are incorporated in my concluding chapter to *Earth Habitat* (Fortress 2001), pp. 200–202. Note the range of their creative engagement.]

The Lead Institutions took some substantive steps of intrinsic value to the participants. But few of these lead institutions sustained their three-fold commitment, mostly because: a) their involvement was so dependent on one or two key professors who retired and were not replaced by equally committed faculty; b) their administrators still viewed the environmental crisis as just another important issue, rather than being the pivotal new reality of our time; and c) TEMEC could not raise significant funding to undergird the lead institution strategy for the long haul.

In contrast to those hampering factors, notice the following positive factors that contributed to movement toward Eco-Justice or Care for Creation as a focus of theological and religious studies: theological-ethical vision, the support of key administrators, involvement of energized faculty across the departments, appealing and academically important course offerings, institutional participation in sustainable practices, links with green sciences and NGOs, availability and use of special educational or financial resources.⁵

Basic Goals for Theological Education

I want to focus on the mission of theological education that we have tried to foster, instead of the details of a program that ran its course. The TEMEC program may have been “remaindered”, but the concept holds, deserving on-going attention.

⁵ The ecology of factors and tasks that any religious studies department or theological school should consider are scanned in the 2 pp. TEMEC survey instrument (circulated in 2002) appended to this essay.

The **overall goal** has been and is to make eco-justice a central focus of faith commitment, of scholarly work and learning, and of ethically coherent action at personal, institutional, and political levels of moral agency. The point, after all, is for all of us to become competent, faithful earth citizens.

Four **related aims** are to:

- 1) Explore new dimensions of research and teaching on ecology, justice and faith; and to foster professional development of scholars and religious leaders in ways that cross the fields of theology and connect with cognate disciplines in the humanities and sciences. (In this respect, eco-justice is to theological education as human ecology is to environmental studies.)
- 2) Engage theological educators in critical reflection on what most needs to be learned and how it is taught, as well as what is still being ignored. (Warning: don't proliferate this list of basics; focus on and integrate core content and pedagogy!)
- 3) Assist religious studies and theological education to reform course work (including field education), institutional practices, and public engagement so as to equip students for earth community citizenship as they lead religious communities, pursue green studies, or enter business and professional life.
- 4) Prepare the ground for regional cooperation in graduate education that "weaves" a tapestry of environmental and religious studies, and that provides public continuing education on ecology, justice and faith.

The overall goal and related aims just listed continue to be quite pertinent for theological schools and religion departments that would take the environmental challenge seriously. Articulating these or similar aims is a crucial step for a seminary or religion department to take. (One caution: what you project and how you name it communicates a lot, or not. E.g. I find it inadequate to name such an initiative "Green" or "Sustainable" Theological Education in a culture with corporations that have co-opted both words for mere profit.)

Eight Pitfalls for theological schools to avoid (or climb out of):

- a) Reliance on elective course work with an interested professor or two. (When a key prof. leaves or retires, the emphasis will fade, unless it is basic to the schools mission statement, core curriculum and faculty appointments.)
- b) Course work offered in one theological field of study but not the others.
- c) Lack of integrative learning opportunities that have theological-ethical depth and are informed by green sciences or NGO's working for eco-justice.

d) Disinterest in field education /internships and cross-cultural studies that connect theological students with ecology and justice organizations in civil society.

e) Indifference to this subject matter in the faculty appointment process, in accrediting standards, and in denominational expectations for ordination.

f) At upper levels of graduate study, instead of clarifying a solid core, a tendency to proliferate or fragment the subject-matter for research and dissertations, leading this new area of religious studies to self-dissipate.

g) Preoccupation with green practices and buildings (even the Gentiles do the same, and they often do it much better), instead of pursuing the three-fold commitment expected of lead institutions.

h) Failure to foster practices that matter most in a scorching world. (What is the single most important practice? Surprise answer: eating local food.)

Obviously, participating in an eco-justice future hasn't yet become important enough to most theological educators, parish pastors, or denominational leaders to result in most congregations and seminaries institutionalizing it. Few schools offer more than a couple of elective courses and some pale green practices, while barely becoming publicly engaged. Even in 2007, when public environmental concern finally reached a tipping point, the need for ecological reformation still was not widely perceived as central to the mission of theological education; and few professors as yet comprehend that the deepening environmental crisis actually shifts the axis of theology, ethics and ministry.

NB. As the axis does shift, we think and talk differently about what God is doing in the world and what the human vocation is today. The model of ministry also changes. Theological education that would equip participants to undertake the great work of caring for creation and for people on this planet, guided by eco-justice vision and values, will foster an alternative to the prevailing model of pastoral ministry. The popular emphasis on therapeutic chaplaincy of church members reinforced by congregational development techniques has been rather indifferent to the larger earth community. Emphasis now needs to shift toward appreciating existence in the *oikos* (earth as home), and ministering to vulnerable places⁶ as well as people experiencing eco-injustice.

Scholarship and teaching in religion and ethics must illumine/undergird earth citizenship in this pivotal century. But without special intervention or mobilization, few theological schools will adequately equip their students to meet this priority moral assignment of our time, and not enough faculty members will reexamine what/how they teach and venture into cross-disciplinary inquiry beyond the ubiquitous, academic *laissez faire* box that has confined much theological research and teaching to specialized fields.

⁶ To begin exploring the potential and ambiguity of ministry to place, see Laura Stivers, "A Sense of Place in a Globalized World," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 27, 1 (2007) 95-112.

Next Steps

So what shall we do now to foster theological education that explores God's love for creation and participates in an eco-justice future? I suggest taking the following **next steps**, (none of which depend on completed reform of a theological school or religion department, but all of which require special funding and creative planning by higher educators acting cooperatively):

First, continue to foster lead institutions that commit to the 3-fold emphasis on curriculum transformation, institutional or community practices, and publicly engaged earth citizenship. Each of the three commitments needs to be thought through deeply and pursued with creative energy.

Second, offer interested faculty professional development in a revolving annual institute hosted by one of several theological schools and departments of religion that are participating in the ecological reformation.

Third, bring highly motivated students to those rare locales where several seminary or religious studies professors teach subject matter that equips us to join in the great work of seeking the well-being of both Earth and people.

Fourth, reach out to the environmentally-engaged community beyond seminary and church, e.g., through continuing education courses on the spirituality and ethics of eco-justice taught by a cross-disciplinary team.

We are in a time of turning, as the late Bill Gibson,⁷ my good friend and co-leader in the eco-justice movement, began saying over 25 years ago. To discern how urgent this has become, ask yourself, as I often ask classes or audiences: What is the turn-around time for North American culture to engage the environmental challenge of rapid global warming, deteriorating eco-systems, increasing poverty, vanishing species and inappropriate techno-remedies? Two decades? One decade? The realistic and eschatological answer is: Not long. Our time for repentance has come.

[An earlier draft of this paper was delivered by DTH at a preliminary session of the American Academy of Religion meeting in San Diego, November 16, 2007.]

⁷ For over two decades as a campus minister at Cornell University, William E. Gibson helped to shape ecumenical ethics for earth community, many aspects of which are explored in his book, *Eco-Justice – The Unfinished Journey* (SUNY Press), 2004.

The 21st century will certainly be marked by incredible ecological and social havoc affecting everyone and everykind. How are we going to respond to our historic moral assignment to think carefully and to act imaginatively for the sake of earth community? For religious studies to meet severe eco-injustice realities with spiritual and ethical depth requires crossdisciplinary theological-ethical reflection and movement toward commensurate faith community embodiment oriented to ...what? As more students, teachers, and administrators in theological schools and departments of religious studies comprehend this time of turning we need to be clear about the direction we want to move.

Every school now claims to be “greening” institutional operations and at least some residential units. Numerous campuses have declared their intention to become carbon neutral . Meanwhile, lots of technology entrepreneurs and energy and biotech companies -- including the same corporations that have been so busy decreasing nature and culture.-- are trying to co-opt this and similar social efforts to become greener.

Authentic greening (versus green style and green washing) is important, but is that the main thing theological schools are trying to do? I hope we intend to focus on and work toward a bigger idea to meet the environmental challenge. In my view, religious environmentalism, or ecologically responsive faith and life, has the bigger purpose of fostering **sustainable community** -- locally, regionally, and globally -- for the good of all earth’s inhabitants. Sustainable community, a term with deep ecological, social and spiritual resonance, is both our goal and the way to get there. Just and sustainable community – or eco-justice – is the end and means of appropriate theology, ethics, daily work and practice, and it is time to make it a central focus of theological education.

Just and sustainable community – healthy community at every level, fostered by mature religion and democratic politics -- is not to be confused with sustainable development. Rather than to deplete biological and cultural wealth, our goal is to sustain them.

“Adherents of sustainable community... are not trying to wrap the global environment around the integrating global economy pumped by corporations on steroids. They are asking. ‘What makes for healthy community [on every] level and how do we wrap both economy and environment around that, aware that Earth’s requirements are fundamental?’ They are attentive to questions that global capitalism, even as sustainable development, rarely asks: namely, what are the essential bonds of human community and culture, as well as the bonds of the human with the more-than-human world; and what is the meaning of such primal bonds for [our] way of life? “⁸

To seek sustainable community oriented to eco-justice, motivated by religious faith and informed by theological study takes us on an ambitious journey of spiritual, social, economic, political integrity that cares for the vital, but suffering, community of life.

⁸ Larry L. Rasmussen, “The Earth Charter, Globalization, and Sustainable Community,” in Gibson, *Eco-Justice – The Unfinished Journey*, p. 291.

APPENDIX: SURVEY of Religious Studies Departments and Theological Schools
(format compressed to make this a 2 pager) [developed May, 2002]

Name: _____ Position: _____
Institution: _____
Address: _____ E-mail: _____

1. **Curriculum:** To what extent does your religious studies department or theological school address issues of ecology, justice and sustainability or explore developments in eco-theology, environmental ethics, religion and ecology, etc.

(don't know) 1 (none) 2 (a little) 3 (quite a bit) 4 (a great deal)

What are some examples of courses required or offered?

How many of these are core courses (not just electives)? ____

Taught by regular faculty? ____ Taught by Adjuncts ____

2. **Faculty Development:** To what extent does your university department or theological school provide significant faculty and staff development opportunities and rewards to enhance understanding, teaching, and research in ecology and religion?

0 (don't know) 1 (none) 2 (a little) 3 (quite a bit) 4 (a great deal)

Please describe:

3. **Operations:** To what extent are your campus operations (institutional habits) ** environmentally responsible (through practices of energy use, water conservation, and grounds keeping, as well as purchasing of local food, recycled paper, and other products)?

0 (don't know) 1 (none) 2 (a little) 3 (quite a bit) 4 (a great deal)

Please describe these campus activities:

Which of these institutional habits have been most difficult to change?

4. **Community Outreach:** To what extent is your institution engaged locally, regionally, or globally in public outreach, service learning or internships, and forming partnerships with other educators, civil society organizations, and businesses to enhance environmental responsibility or humane sustainable development?

0 (don't know) 1 (none) 2 (a little) 3 (quite a bit) 4 (a great deal)

Please describe:

5. **Student Opportunities:** To what extent does your institution offer student opportunities to learn about and lead others toward environmental stewardship (such as new student orientation, scholarships, internships, cross-cultural study, job

placement counseling, and participation in education/action groups for just and sustainable community)?

0 (don't know) 1 (none) 2 (a little) 3 (quite a bit) 4 (a great deal)
Please comment:

6. **Institutional Mission:** To what extent does your school's statement of mission and purpose express an explicit concern, in course work and institutional practices, for ecology and justice, or care for creation?

0 (don't know) 1 (none) 2 (a little) 3 (quite a bit) 4 (a great deal)

Can you give specific example (or include actual text if available)?

7. **Coordinated Planning:** Does your institution support administrative positions or committees (such as a Director of Environmental Programs or a Sustainability Task Force, etc.) that reflect a clear commitment to environmental responsibility and sustainability? No Yes If so, please describe:

8. **Factors Shaping Success or Failure** of an Environmental Initiative:

In your opinion, what factors have shaped the response of your school or department? e.g., support of key administrators; involvement of energized faculty; appealing and academically legitimized course offerings; broad involvement in green practices; a strong fit between the initiative and your institutional culture; links with other departments and civil society organizations; use of special educational or financial resources; etc

9. **What major obstacles have you encountered?**

10. **What next steps are planned at your university or theological school to meet the deepening environmental crisis?**

Your Comments on this survey are welcome.**

** This brief survey adapts questions about sustainability in higher education formulated by ULSF -- University Leaders for a Sustainable Future -- as that organization developed a more extensive survey of higher education institutions.