

For the whole world

Loving our neighbors includes caring for creation that supports all our earthly lives

By Katharine Jefferts Schori April 18, 2008

[Episcopal Life] I have had the remarkable privilege to visit several Episcopal schools and institutions of theological education in the last year. Several of them are involved in growing their own food, at vastly differing scales. The Ecumenical Seminary at Matanzas, Cuba, has acres of fields of organic vegetables, raised alike for the students and faculty of the seminary, the people of the neighborhood, and for market.

St. Hilda's and St. Hugh's School in midtown Manhattan grows lettuce and other greens for the students' lunches -- in a rooftop greenhouse. A developing diocesan project in Quito, Ecuador, will raise organic produce and livestock as an agricultural teaching laboratory, for market, and to feed the students and retreatants who will call the place home. We are beginning to understand in new ways our ancient belief that we become what we eat -- in the body of Christ, as well as in the food that sustains our bodies.

This growing multilayered awareness is a sign of enormous hope for this earth. The Judaeo-Christian tradition has been famously blamed for much of the current environmental crisis, particularly for our misreading of Genesis 1:28 as a charge to "fill the earth and subdue it." Our forebears were so eager to distinguish their faith from the surrounding Canaanite religion and its concern for fertility that some of them worked overtime to separate us from an awareness of "the hand of God in the world about us," especially in a reverence for creation. How can we love God if we do not love what God has made?

We base much of our approach to loving God and our neighbors in this world on our baptismal covenant. Yet our latest prayer book was written just a bit too early to include caring for creation among those explicit baptismal promises. I would invite you to explore those promises a bit more deeply -- where and how do they imply caring for the rest of creation?

We are beginning to be aware of the ways in which our lack of concern for the rest of creation results in death and destruction for our neighbors. We cannot love our neighbors unless we care for the creation that supports all our earthly lives. We are not respecting the dignity of our fellow creatures if our sewage or garbage fouls their living space. When atmospheric warming, due in part to the methane output of the millions of cows we raise each year to produce hamburger, begins to slowly drown the island homes of our neighbors in the South Pacific, are we truly sharing good news?

You will read this soon after Easter, and that celebration will undoubtedly have included lots of physical signs of new life -- eggs, flowers, new green growth. As the Easter season continues, consider how your daily living can be an act of greater life for other creatures.

How can you enact the new life we know in Jesus the Christ? In other words, how can you be sacrament, the outward and visible sign, of the grace that you know in the resurrected Christ? How can your living let others live more abundantly?

The food we eat, the energy we use, the goods and foods we buy, the ways in which we travel, are all opportunities -- choices and decisions -- to be for others, both human and other. Our Christian commitment is for this -- that we might live that more abundant life, and that we might do it in a way that is for the whole world.