

The journey called aging cannot be understood outside the environment within which it happens, namely the earth itself that sustains all life. And thus we must put the lives of our elders into the context of the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—where nothing looms as large as the issues of a sustainable environment.

While we cannot avoid the fact that the global situation daily becomes less sustainable, there are hopeful signs. Twenty-five years ago most people [including those who are now the elders in our congregations and other small intentional gatherings] enthusiastically supported the policies that still dominate the planet. They accepted the theories of the experts, and looked forward to the prosperity that would fulfill their expectations. That is not true today. Disillusionment is widespread. There is openness for new ideas.<sup>1</sup>

The journey of aging is happening to each of us within this compelling context. Whatever the challenges and opportunities of aging, responsibility for the earth is shared between us all. To take the elders out of the heart of this conversation would be wrong.

Interspersed throughout this text is a series of remarkable panels that make up a “Stations of the Earth” in a garden in front of the south window-wall of a church in Toronto, Canada. More about that church later. As you view the panels and read the text below each panel, take a moment of silence for your personal meditation. There are nine panels.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Cobb, Jr., The road to Sustainability: Progress and Regress, <http://religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3375>

<sup>2</sup> These Cosmic Stations of the Cross were crafted in stained glass for Holy Cross Centre, Port Burwell, ON, a Centre dedicated to developing spirituality for the new ecological age. The artist is Carolyn Van Huysse-Delaney. The link between the evolution of the earth and the cross was articulated by Teilhard de Chardin, “Nothing resembles the evolution of the earth so much as the *via crucis*.” These stained glass windows are now reproduced, with the text you will read below each, as Garden Panels at St. Gabriel’s Passionist Parish, Willowdale, ON. For an analysis of the original stained glass stations, see Susan D. Shantz, *The Stations of the Cross* (London, ON: Centre for Social and Humanistic Studies, University of Western Ontario), 105-123.



### **Station One: The universe flares forth**

At once explosive and radiating, fiery and full of power, the original flaring forth provided the originating conditions for all that followed and continues to follow in our own time. Perhaps the greatest challenge of this new century is to appreciate who we are against the backdrop of what we are learning about the Cosmos, in its dramatic beginning more than 13 million years ago, and its contemporary unfolding.

*“All the energy that would ever exist in the entire course of time erupted as a single quantum—a singular gift—existence. If in the future, stars would blaze and lizards would blink in their light, these actions would be powered by the same numinous energy that flared forth at the dawn of time.”*

Brian Swimme, THE UNIVERSE STORY

I know that the environment and the future of our children’s children to the seventh generation are widespread concerns. Perhaps for some, Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* has made the awareness of the fragility of the earth and the warming of the environment more acute. Perhaps it was the Bill Moyers’s show, *Is God Green?* And of course for some the impetus was quite local: the terribly destructive tornados in mid-west, Gulf-coast hurricanes, or California droughts.

One author put it succinctly; we now live in an era where “Nothing is ecologically innocent.”<sup>3</sup> Like many of you, I can’t even get rid of a Styrofoam cup or an Albertson or Kroger’s plastic bag without second and third thoughts. Nothing is ecologically innocent.

I study Christian congregations and their contexts, and I am convinced that no context is as important as the degradation of the environment. There are Christians whose primary concern is immortality and the afterlife. I am not among them. Immortality will not be the issue for generations who are never born. Daniel Maguire put things crisply: “If current trends continue, we will not. And that is qualitatively and epochally true. If religion does not speak to this, it is an obsolete distraction.”<sup>4</sup>



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<sup>3</sup> George Myerson, *Ecology and the End of Postmodernity* (Icon Books: Cambridge, UK, 2001), 70.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Maguire, *The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity: Reclaiming the Revolution* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993), 13.

## Station 2: Our blue green planet emerges

Born of the fiery activity of the early universe, Planet Earth began its journey around the sun and galaxy 4½ billion years ago. All generations have sought to understand the meaningfulness of Earth, Air, Fire and Water. It is not unusual that we too should ponder this cosmic event.

*“If we lived on the moon, for example, our sense of the Divine would reflect the lunar landscape. We would not have anything like the awareness of the Divine that we have at present. Imagination is required for religious development. What would there be to imagine if we lived on the moon?”*

*But think of being born on the moon and then coming to the earth. What a stunning, beatific experience that would be!”*

Thomas Berry, BEFRIENDING THE EARTH

In the course of working through a book outline on eco-theology and eco-ethics last year, I went through a real slump. Everything I read was so dire. Now, without taking you on the mental and emotional roller coaster I rode for the best part of a year, let me take you to the place where the roller coaster stopped and I got off. People of faith who were deeply aware of environmental crises and profoundly concerned about their grandchildren and their grandchildren’s grandchildren provided that mental and emotional place. As aware and concerned as they were, they continued in what I came to see as “practices of hope.” These were not exclusively older adults or congregations of older adults, but it was the voices of the elders that were clearest. Perhaps they had more at stake. Perhaps they had longer horizons. Perhaps as their sight lost acuity their vision sharpened. Perhaps it was just that, as the median age of the congregations of the historic and ecumenical denominations—those with which I am most familiar—is about 65, I saw and heard a lot of people who look like me. I am grateful to them and to other elders in intentional communities that, like congregations of elders at their best, “encourage group-centered, cultural-based altruism at the expense of personal selfishness, which in turn

favours the genetic survival of the group, then religious traditions can be a cultural force which favorable influence the direction and/or strength of biological evolution.”<sup>5</sup>



### **Station 3: Life Emerges**

Very early on the Earth’s journey, life arose, first with great simplicity, but constantly acquiring the marvelous information and transformational power of DNA. From a common origin, magnificently diverse genetic codes arise.

*Scientists remind us that we are precipitating a vast extinction of the abundance and variety of the web of life. Thomas Berry highlights the religious dimension of the crisis: “To wantonly destroy a living species is to silence forever a Divine voice.”*

To practice “green hope” is not easy, nor is it to be taken for granted. In fact, for most of us one of the most puzzling aspects of our ecological problems is how hard it is for us and for others to choose now to act in ways that are, as it were, against our own immediate interests and in favor of the interests of people who suffer from our over-

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<sup>5</sup> King, 117.

indulgence in carbon fuels and our disproportionate use of all of earth's resources.

Twenty percent of us create 80% of all pollutants in the atmosphere.

Perhaps this is because we are stuck in the information age, while we live in a new century that is the age of biology. As Carolyn King points out in her book *Habitat of Grace: Biology, Christianity, and the global environmental crisis* it is easier to understand human nature if we understand biology; if we understand that culture is an elaboration of biology; and if we recognize that free will must be exercised within biological constraints.<sup>6</sup>

From the perspective of “what evolutionary psychology has to say about the evolution of public morality and about how community decisions are made,”<sup>7</sup> we learn specifically that “the default setting of human nature [ . . . ] is the need and ingrained habit of fitting in with, and looking out for one's own closest group.”<sup>8</sup> Few biological predispositions are as real as the need to care for one's own group and most of all for one's own children—and we judge this to be right. “The force behind the moral attitudes that comes most naturally is to be conditionally co-operative with member of one's own group, but much less co-operative with—at least wary of, and necessarily hostile to—members of other groups.”<sup>9</sup> But it is not enough for earth in crisis.

Carolyn King concludes, “Unfortunately for the environmental movement, it is basically unnatural to humans to think in terms of the global, rather than the local, community.”<sup>10</sup> But that is not the whole story. There are places of hope, practices of

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<sup>6</sup> Carolyn King, *Habitat of Grace: Biology, Christianity and the global environmental crisis* (Hindmarsh, AU: Australian Theological Forum), 102.

<sup>7</sup> King, 94.

<sup>8</sup> King, 95.

<sup>9</sup> King, 96-7.

<sup>10</sup> King, 123.

hope, and people of hope—and knowing what we are up against in terms of evolutionary biology locates the problem with precision and sets the parameters within which congregations, gathered intentional groups, and individuals must work for a sustainable earth.

It is the very fact of abundance within the universe that makes it possible to freely give gifts, in particular attention to suffering and to its causes. Anne Primavesi writes:

The presence of ‘givenness’ within myself too, my own ability to give, also flows from procreative interactions between beings who lived before me (most obviously my biological ancestors) and ‘gave’ birth to me. [ . . . ] What I give, and to whom, will be decided by the quality of attention I pay to those around me. Indeed, that attention may itself be the greatest gift I can offer them. In particular, being attentive to what it means for someone else to be alive means being attentive to their wellbeing but, above all, to their suffering and to its causes.<sup>11</sup>



#### **Station 4: The human emerges**

We unique creatures are here depicted linked to all life and manifesting passion and peace, male and female, wholeness and fragmentation. In our time, humans have transformed the Earth with an effectiveness previously unimaginable. Yet, as Thomas Berry states, we are the creatures “in whom the universe reflects on and celebrates itself in a unique mode of conscious self-awareness.” *THE GREAT WORK*

<sup>11</sup> Anne Primavesi, *Gaia’s Gift* (London: Routledge, 2003) 238-9.

*“In one manner or the other it still remains true that, even in the view of the mere biologist, the human epic resembles nothing so much as a Way of the Cross”*  
Teilhard de Chardin, THE PHENOMENON OF MAN

There is a recent part of our evolutionary history—just 30,000 years ago—that we still benefit from today, namely the care of grandmothers (and by extension of grandfathers) for the children. Compelling in its urgency to create a safe future is the contribution of grandparents, who in their connection with their grandchildren display a deep, somatic, and even survival-of-the-species kind of faith. This must be understood within the larger context of history and the survival of the human race. For the past 30,000 years of human history, grandparents have raised children while their own adult children were hunters and gatherers, fisher folk and farmers, artisans and miners.

This not just an accident of economic history. It is written deep into that part of us that controls *life-preserving behavior for the species* that the young and the bearers of the young must be protected if we collectively are to survive. From an evolutionary point of view, longevity is not an accident but is somehow crucial to our development as a species. That's the perspective of the so-called "Grandmother Hypothesis," suggesting that post-menopausal survival of grandmothers permitted the nurturing of young children and the success of the human species . . . by providing extra care for children. The first grandmothers, in the Neanderthal era, were available to baby-sit, and while they did so, they had the time and the audience to which to pass on the stories from their own youth. This is credited with sparking the birth of traditional culture. Grandmothers are believed to be the evolutionary advantage of modern humankind.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> < <http://www.aka-alias.net/2004/09/grandmother-hypothesis.html>>, last accessed March 6, 2007.

Built deep into the unconscious mechanisms of the brain is a level of attraction and bonding that helps grandparents do what they have done (and in most parts of the world continue to do) – care for the grandchildren while the parents toil in the workplace.



### **Station 5: The rise of agriculture**

Here Mother Earth’s abundance of nourishing and healing harvests is seen to be interrupted by a barren gap. Gradually introduced by the human invention of agriculture, starting 10,000 years ago, it continues to widen as long as we are blind to the vibrant web of life.

*“Look at the planet. Everywhere freedom twines its way around necessity, inventing new strings of occasion, lassoing time and putting it through its varied and spirited paces.*

*Everywhere live things lash at the rocks.”*

Annie Dillard, TEACHING A STONE TO TALK

When we look at the grandparents that are part of our social circles or who look like the grandparents of the literature on grandparenting of the historic and ecumenical denominations, we see a type of grandparenting that is a cultural aberration—leisure or companion grandparenting. Grandparent-grandchild relationship defined by two weeks at

Disney World and two weeks at the beach—or some version thereof that plays out the affective, autonomous role of grandparents—is not the problem with companion grandparenting. The problem is only stated and addressed when a serious question is raised for those who now have the resources and leisure to be companion grandparents, namely, what is the appropriate use of their talents, strengths, and resources. Millions upon millions of young children who do not have companion grandparents cannot afford to lose from a wider social arena the strengths of the older adult population.

We have access to a historically more typical picture of what grandparents have always done if we look outside our own social circles. In our own country today some, perhaps many, poor grandparents raise grandchildren because it is their cultural norm, or because parents are absent by reason of work, sickness, or incarceration. It's hard to be green when you are urban poor; it's hard to protect the grandchildren from poor environments. The economic and social injuries of class are so powerful.

But I have often been deeply touched by grandparents raising grandchildren--grandparents whose deep faith in the future of these same children is the root and raw energy that wills to give all the young a chance for a sustainable future. This is a practice of hope in often quite desperate circumstances. It is the best and truest kind of the practice of hope and perhaps most closely models what elders must do who have the luxury of practicing green hope.

Our challenge is twofold: first, to be sure that every child lives in a healthy physical and social environment; and second, to work to redress the growing threats to the stability of urban families and communities.



### **Station six: The rise of culture and religion**

The Tree of Life here exhibits the human form in two modes—the “cruciform:” head red—and the ecstatic: head white. The tear in Earth’s integrity is deepened by the human zeal for transcendence, whether through culture or religion. Only the aboriginal sense of human transcendence seems to have remained free of this disastrous psychic distancing from the Earth.

*“We need an experience wherein human consciousness awakens to the grandeur and sacred quality of the Earth process. This awakening is our human participation in the dream of the Earth, the dream that is carried in its integrity not in any of Earth’s cultural expressions but in the depth of our genetic coding. Therein the Earth functions at a depth beyond our capacity for active thought. We can only be sensitized to what is being revealed to us.”*

Thomas Berry, THE GREAT WORK

Bill McKibben, himself now an elder, began a recent article in *The Christian Century Magazine* titled, “Meltdown: Running out of time on global warming,” with these words: “We need a movement to combat climate change, we need it fast, and we need it to involve as many [congregations and intentional communities] as possible.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> February 20, 2007 [http://www.christiancentury.org/article\\_print.lasso?id=2978](http://www.christiancentury.org/article_print.lasso?id=2978), last accessed March 7, 2007.

He's right. And he certainly would not have said this were he not sure that many communities of faith are already open to or engaged in "practices of hope."

"Overruling our deep-seated natural emotions is never easy"<sup>14</sup> but it is possible. "Biological predispositions are real, but they cease at the frontier of the tribe, so that is where Christian theology must take over from cultural evolution [ . . . to] answer the greatest question of all: 'And who is my neighbor?'"<sup>15</sup>

"In other words, 'grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it', as Aquinas maintained [ . . . ] Cultural traditions such as religion reinforce existing group selection favouring the better survival of the most strongly co-operative social groups. It is our best hope for the future."<sup>16</sup>

"Religion can encourage group-centered, cultural-based altruism at the expense of personal selfishness, which in turn favours the genetic survival of the group, then religious traditions can be a cultural force which favorable influence the direction and/or strength of biological evolution."<sup>17</sup>

"We are creatures adapted to small groups, ideally not more than about one hundred and fifty strong. [ . . . ] If we are to find a solution, we have to do it together, and soon. It will require the sort of mediation that an informed, alert, contemporary church can contribute—a cool-headed but affectionate view of human nature, combined with a theology that encourages people to trust each other and negotiate conservation agreements in good faith."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> King, 109.

<sup>15</sup> King, 121.

<sup>16</sup> King, 116.

<sup>17</sup> King, 117.

<sup>18</sup> King, 123.



### **Station 7: The Rise of Science and Technology**

The nuclear cloud, product of science and technology, is fascinating and alluring. But its violence is contrasted with the opulence of our privileged planet. If science is to become Wisdom, its insights must transcend the technological. Then it can teach how to re-join our beautiful and numinous Earth.

*“The crucial step here is to awaken to the fact of the Sun’s gravitational power. The Earth is one immense planet and it is being whipped around the Sun by the power of the Sun. This is something the Sun is doing in every instant of every day. We are held by the Sun. If the Sun released us from our bond with it, we would sail off into deep space... To contemplate the solar system until you feel...this immense planet being swung around its massive cosmic partner is to touch an ocean of wonder as you take a first step into inhabiting the actual universe and solar system and Earth.”*

Brian Swimme, THE HIDDEN HEART OF THE COSMOS

Let me tell you about some congregations and other groups that are negotiating conservation agreements in good faith. There is St. Gabriel’s Roman Catholic Church in suburban Toronto.<sup>19</sup> I quote from an architectural review in the *Globe and Mail*.

Rather than creating an introverted experience of worship inspired by stained glass windows, the emphasis has been placed on the mystery of the natural world. Views are directed to the outdoor gardens just beyond the massive clear-

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.stgabesparish.ca/New\\_church/index.php](http://www.stgabesparish.ca/New_church/index.php)

glass curtain wall. [. . .] Oriented to the south, the church embraces the sun and disperses it throughout its spaces.<sup>20</sup>



On paper, St. Gabriel’s may well be the most sustainable church in Canada. But there is another message that comes from a walk through the garden where the stations of the earth are to be located. They chart the evolution and trauma of the universe, from the big bang, to the bursting forth of flowers, to the beginning of agriculture, to another station depicting the atomic bomb’s mushroom cloud. “To wantonly destroy a living species is to silence forever a Divine Voice” wrote Thomas Berry, the earth scholar.<sup>21</sup>

These are the garden panels whose text I have quoted throughout, and they tell a powerful story of hope, of elders, of a community of faith. The small religious community that financed and built this church has an average age of well over 70 years; Thomas Berry, who was the inspiration for the design, is 92. St. Gabriel’s is the “practice of hope” of committed and visionary elders.

The February 26, 2007, issue of *the Presbyterian Outlook* points to a PBS special by Bill Moyers, *Is God Green?* Moyers “examined the increasing involvement of

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<sup>20</sup> Lisa Rochon, Cityspace, “Seeing the light on Sheppard” (October 5, 2006)

<sup>21</sup> Idem

evangelical Christians in the environmental movement.”<sup>22</sup> Part of Moyers’s special tells the story of the Vineyard church in Boise, Idaho, an evangelical nondenominational congregation, [where] Pastor Tri Robinson—a man clearly edging towards elderhood—helped created a ministry called “Let’s Tend the Garden,” describing environmental stewardship as a “biblical mandate.” Vineyard urges Christians to become involved in everything from recycling and energy conservation, to cleaning up highways and the Boise river, to working with the U.S forest Service to build and maintain hiking trails.<sup>23</sup>

Under the leadership of Rev. Richard Cizik, Evangelical Christians—whose national association has 30 million members—are identifying environmental concerns and taking care of the earth as a moral issue connected to religious traditions. And they are acting on it! These are practices of hope. Rev. Richard Cizik

said in an interview last year that he experienced a profound “conversion” on the global warming issue in 2002 after listening to scientists at a retreat. Now an emblem for a new breed of evangelical environmentalists, he has been written about in *Vanity Fair* and *Newsweek* and has appeared in “The Great Warming,” a documentary on climate change.<sup>24</sup>

Cizik came quite recently to this conviction. But there are pastors, laity, and academics in every denomination and in every religious group who have been “practicing green hope” in their writings, teachings, and lives for decades. Book titles include *Buddhism and Ecology: the Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*; *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Human*; *Torah of the Earth: Exploring 4000 years of Ecology in Jewish Thought*; and *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans*. I know the Christian tradition, and I know—at least by name,

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<sup>22</sup> Leslie Scanlon, “People of faith concerned about ecology; churches going ‘green,’” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Feb. 26, 2007, p. 8-9.

<sup>23</sup> Idem

<sup>24</sup> Idem

reputation, and their works—many of the pioneers in this area. These are people who, academically, practiced hope in their writings beginning back in the days of Rachel Carson’s *The Silent Spring*, Greenpeace, Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful*, and Starhawk. They took risks; they were leaders; and 40 years later these elders and their texts are still practices of hope. These are women and men passionate about social justice, about the women and children of the majority world, about our own citizens of color whose health is compromised by the effluents of Superfund clean-up sites and toxic inner cities.



### **Station 8: The Rise of the Flowers**

Because the natural history of flowers in the Earth Community has been so spectacular and meaningful, it is presented in these Stations out of its evolutionary sequence. It becomes a symbol of hope for the Earth and our own religious ability to value the Earth as Sacred.

*“Somewhere, just a short time before the close of the Age of Reptiles, there occurred a soundless, violent explosion. It lasted millions of years, but it was an explosion, nevertheless. It marked the emergence of the angiosperms—the flowering plants... Flowers changed the face of the planet. Without them, the world we know—even (we ourselves)—would never have existed.”*

Loren Eiseley, THE IMMENSE JOURNEY

There are, of course, elders of faith and faithful elders whose efforts are not directly connected with a religious denomination. But perhaps they can model for us practices that we can incorporate into our own congregations. Some of the practices of green hope in which they are engaged are astonishing. *Second Journey: Mindfulness, Service, and Community in the Second Half of Life* is among a small number of emerging organizations helping birth a new vision of the rich possibilities of the second half of life. Much of *Second Journey* energies are focused on the opportunity to encourage the growth of new communities – and new models of community – to support living, learning, and social change for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. [They] recognize that existing institutions – from senior centers to Sun city – are based on assumption about “the elderly” that do not apply to the generation of Baby Boomers now poised to redefine later life.

Our culture is entering a fertile period of social experimentation. The current conventional “continuum of care” – which includes catered and assisted-living facilities and nursing homes, late life options you will NOT find covered in the pages of this Guide – is being replaced by promising new forms, promising innovative solutions to the challenge of Creating Community in Later Life. Among their co-housing communities is the EcoVillage at Ithaca. In their own words they are, “part of a growing global movement for a saner, more sustainable human culture.”<sup>25</sup>

For those of us who love cities more than the country (and I, for one, confess that trees make me nervous), there is another of their initiative that is a practice of green hope.

The Los Angeles Eco village is located three miles west of downtown L.A. These urban pioneers seek to model low-impact living patterns, as they increase neighborhood self-reliance in a variety of areas, such as livelihood, food production, energy and water use, affordable housing, transit, recreation, waste reduction and education.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> <http://secondjourney.org/RESOURCES.htm>, accessed March 7, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> [Los Angeles Eco-Village: A Model for Human and Planetary Survival](#)” by Maggie Coulter (*Profiles in Sustainable Housing*, Fall 2004)

The Eco-Village's founder, Lois Arkin, believes that

At some point in the not-so-distant future, our choices will be increasingly limited by the accelerating degradation of our life support systems — air, soil, water. Our work... is about demonstrating that it is possible to make lifestyle choices that actually increase the quality of life while significantly reducing our environmental impacts.<sup>27</sup>

These are among the practices of hope that got me off the emotional and spiritual roller coaster I was riding as I studied anew ecotheology and ecoethics.

There are other practices of elder-hope to which I can point, but as I have indicated there are strong evolutionary tendencies that we have to recognize and move beyond. We may choose to articulate these in the core Christian language of the cross and creation. The journey to sustainability will not be easy.



### **Cross and Creation**

*These “Stations of our Cosmic Earth” are reproductions of a series of stained glass windows originally commissioned by Holy Cross Centre.*

*A “Station” is an important moment that produced an irreversible Earth/Cosmic transformation.*

*The general theme of the “Stations of Our Cosmic Earth” is depicted here. The Cross is close to the earth and surrounded by colourful flowers, affirming that it is linked*

<sup>27</sup> <http://secondjourney.org/RESOURCES.htm>, accessed March 7, 2007.

*to the Story of Creation. The artist suggests that the space in the center of the Cross hints at an open space of wondrous possibility.*

*Although it is the symbol of suffering and death, the Cross also proclaims hope and resurrection. Carved from a tree it is also the Tree of Life.*

When we come to the realization of what our actions do to the poor of the world, it is a moment of shock. Rosemary Radford Ruether tells this story:

A Northern ecofeminism that is not primarily a cultural escapism for an affluent female elite must make concrete connections with women at the bottom of the social-economic system [. . .] I remember standing in a market in Mexico in January looking greedily at boxes of beautiful strawberries and wondering if I might be able to sneak some back through customs into the United States to my snow-covered home. A friend of mine, Gary McEoin, longtime journalist of Latin American liberation struggles, standing next to me, said softly, "Beautiful, aren't they?. . . and they are covered with blood." To be an ecofeminist in my social context is to cultivate that kind of awareness about the invisible underside of the goods and services readily available to me.<sup>28</sup>

Rosemary's story is powerful and poignant. It might also be an example of the kind of face-to-face challenge that is possible in a small group—a congregation of elders, an aging Sunday School class or circle, that might meet the criteria Carolyn King lays out for small groups that maintain social cohesion in a world largely marked by a level of mobility that makes sustained conversation with one's neighbors impossible.

Only when self-interest is restrained by local interactions and the relentless scrutiny of inescapable close associates can it drive the various forms of cooperation and conditional altruism that underpin the lives of [supportive social groups].<sup>29</sup>

In fact, might it be possible that this is precisely the role of congregations whose median age is 70-plus? I am not content to look at our churches and imagine that there is no

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<sup>28</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women Healing Earth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 5.

<sup>29</sup> King, 122.

reason or opportunity for the aging of congregations that is typical of most denominations. I don't see God as a micro-manager, but nor do I attempt theological reflection on congregations without some hope that who we are is within God's Provident and loving care.

In 1991, David Maitland, a scholar and Presbyterian minister, wrote *Aging as Counterculture: A Vocation for the Later Years*. This book seeks to answer the question: "What are the distinctive possibilities in aging?" (13). The title of the book indicates clearly its political thrust and spiritual dynamic. Aging is God's design; the vocation of aging is political and countercultural; the energy to reshape one's world is a response to God's invitation—it is a vocation.

This story was told me by the director of Christian Education at a v-e-r-y wealthy church in Florida.

When men in our church retire—usually at an early age—here's what happens. The man and his wife take a premiere trip around the world. When they get back, the guy buys a yacht and plays a lot of golf. I don't say anything. Sometime later, he sells that yacht and buys a bigger one. I don't say anything. A year later he sells that one and buys a yet bigger yacht. That's when I start watching. Pretty soon I'll see a sense of despair in his eyes. That's when I invite him to lunch with a couple of other guys in exactly the same situation. Just lunch; no agenda. Maybe that first lunch, maybe the second or third lunch, one of the guys will finally blurt out, "I've never been so unhappy." And that's when we start to talk about vocation.

For people of faith, even the wealthiest elderhood is not without a vocational imperative. Aging is a vocation, and as Maitland says, it is countercultural. There is a powerfully countercultural dynamic to aging that is your opportunity, challenge, and responsibility to awaken and foster in the elders of your congregations. I come to this conclusion in part

through study and observation; in part I come to it personally by reason of elderhood. As a colleague recently wrote,

On a personal note, this past month I celebrated my 62nd birthday, thus becoming eligible for (early) Social Security benefits. Being a member of the generation for whom "the personal is the political," I am finding that aging issues are more personal and relevant than ever. And that especially includes concern about what kind of world my children and grandchildren will inherit. Yes, environment is an aging issue.

That or similar kinds of reflection are resonating with increasing intensity for many elders. Being where they are in their personal journeys of life, they simply have come to claim a longer perspective, a further horizon, well past themselves to the next and next and next generations.

First and critical steps need not be complex. Here are three actions for congregations to engage in that cannot wait: own the problem, resist despair, and protect all the children.

Own the problem: become articulate about the depth and breadth of ecological destruction and the specifics of harm and potential harm where you live. Understand the cost of suburbs, the scarcity of carbon resources, the need for alternative sources of energy, and above all the imperative of changing our lifestyles. Join your local environmental group; save your local rivers; support local farmers, join the Sierra Club. Find some local organization that is smart and effective in making change. Don't back off. Own the problem. If we don't and the elders don't, who will?

Resist despair: that's another way of saying, "Practice green hope," but it points to the danger of getting sucked into inaction because the situation seems hopeless. Join forces with people who are practicing green hope. Log on to [www.webofcreation.org](http://www.webofcreation.org) and learn steps to green your congregation. Google "congregations and environment" and

work with the organizations that are the best fit for you. And if you do nothing else, use your vote as the way to change laws so that we send all the children into a sustainable future. Don't back off. Resist despair and practice green hope. If we don't and the elders don't, who will?

Protect all the children: Imitate and emulate the toughness of grandparents in poverty whose deep faith in the future of the children is the root and raw energy that wills to give all the young a chance for a sustainable future. It's no longer just about our own grandchildren. It's about all the children – those to whom we are closely related by blood, those whose blood ties are closer to the beginning of the rise of the human. It's about all the children – human children, and animal children, and insect children and plant children, and the clean air, sky, and soil they all need to survive into a sustainable future. Protect all the children. “Let's reinvent aging congregations and give a new sense of purpose to those further along on the journey of age.” If we don't and the elders don't, who will?

Let us be untiring in our work to lift up the vibrancy and resiliency of the human spirit in the sacred journey of age. All life is holy. Let us practice a green hope together, support and educate each other, and never discount the stake the elders have, each and all, in a sustainable future.