

Prophets with honour: Covering ecology today

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How are Christian publications covering the issue of ecology? On what basis Christian communicators tackle issues of environment? The following article calls for much needed prophetic communication.

'Environmental justice' was a focus of a Christian magazine in a South Asian country in 2008. The first article had the theme 'Climate Change and Christian Witness'. The article summarized insights on the relationship of climate change and Christian commitment for creation. The article did not make any reference to Asia or Asian churches – no wonder, as it was reprinted from a website of a North American Christian group involved in advocacy work for climate justice.

The second article contained a lot of information on the effects of climate change in the world and in the country where the magazine was published, but it did not make any reference to churches or Christian commitment. Again, this was not totally surprising, as the article was produced by a secular news agency.

The third article was written by a British staff member of a London based Christian relief organisation describing the commitment of that organisation in the struggle against climate change. That was the focus on climate change of the magazine. In this case, the editor missed the chance to provide readers with articles that enable them to get a profound knowledge of climate change, to relate it to their own situation, to identify areas of actions and to reflect and act as Christians rooted in the local context.

Unfortunately, this issue of a Church magazine is no exception. A journal of a Christian Council in Asia had the focus 'Environment: Listening to Nature' in June 2007. It contained an editorial by the Executive Director of the Council regretting that Christians in the country so often remain silent on environmental issues.

The main article of the issue was a bible study on Genesis 1-3 by an Australian author, originally published in 1994. While Christian media should often publish articles, meditations and bible studies written by Christians of other churches around the globe, there is also a need to reflect biblical stories from the perspective of the local church and the experience of local Christians.

That is missing in this issue, since the only other article related to the environment is a rather short article by a local author on the effects of an ever-increasing trade and commerce on society and environment.

Fortunately there are other issues of Christian journals and magazines in Asia as well as in other parts of the world dealing with environmental issues and a faith-based commitment for creation in the face of environmental problems and conflicts. An example from Asia is the issue 'Caring for the Earth' of *ccanews* of June 2007, published by the Christian Conference of Asia.

The editorial written by the editor of the magazine, Prawate Khid-arn, has a clear message: 'The destruction of the global atmosphere is a sin against God. True forgiveness is available from God but only after true repentance by the sinner. True repentance requires a conversion of the heart and a transformation of behaviour. Only then can true forgiveness be experienced.'

In a long article in that issue of *ccanews* Freddy De Alwis, the CCA executive secretary for Justice, International Affairs, Development and Service, gives an overview of the processes and effects of climate change and global warming. In his article he deals with problems related to glaciers, rising sea level, scarcity of fresh water etc. and provides readers with at least some proposals how to act, for example to plant trees.

In a third article faith principles on global warming are developed under the headlines Justice, Stewardship, Sustainability and Sufficiency.

Serious alternative coverage in Latin America

An outstanding resource covering ecological (as well as social, economic and political) issues from a Christian perspective is *Latinamerica Press/Noticias Aliadas* located in Lima/Peru. For more than four decades this weekly service in English and Spanish has proven that a serious alternative coverage of events and developments in a region from the perspective of the poor and marginalised is possible.

It has recently shifted from a print medium to an E-journal. On just two days in the second half of February 2009 three articles on ecological problems were put online: Transgenic production up, Humans: the Amazon's greatest enemy, Mapping contamination (in Argentina).

It seems that Christian media in Europe and North America have some advantages when they cover ecological issues. Not only do they have a much higher budget for external authors, they also gain from a network of experts working for the church or in church-related institutions. This enabled, for example, the German church magazine *Zeitzeichen* to publish about half a dozen articles on climate change in the issue of November 2008, written by climate experts of churches and universities as well as by journalists specialised in the coverage of ecological problems.

My own church, the (Lutheran) Northelbian Church in North Germany, has three staff members working full-time or part-time on issues related to climate change plus a pastor for ecological issues and a number of other pastors and church workers who spend part of their working time on ecological problems and solutions. This is a solid expert basis for any communication initiative on ecological problems.

But one has to be aware that countries like Germany have also hundreds of scientists, PR experts and journalists who are paid by industry to prevent a consequent shift towards a sustainable development in Germany. There are powerful groups trying to protect the car industry, the coal industry, the chemical industry against any serious 'green' paradigm shift of the German economy. Compared with this formidable force the few experts and media of the churches seem to be as powerless as David appeared to be in comparison with Goliath.

But the Bible and history show that mere power does not guarantee success. And given the increasing awareness of the German population that an economic concept of 'more of the same' will lead to a global catastrophe, experts and journalists related to the churches – as well as church leaders – can hope to have an impact on society, provided that they have enough courage to read out loud what is written on the wall.

Prophetic communicators required

There are many local contexts in the world where Christian communicators have to play a role in exposing environmental scandals and to name the companies and institutions responsible for these problems. They do this from a Christian perspective arguing that the destruction of rivers, land or forests is an attack on the creation of God – and that people of other faiths can join hands in the struggle against these crimes since such behaviour has to be confronted on the basis of their faiths as well.

This is a challenge, for example, in countries like Brazil, Indonesia or Papua New Guinea, where international logging companies and their local partners destroy huge rain forest areas. It can be dangerous to tackle these environmental crimes since the culprits will use all their influence and power – and often violence – to prevent exposure of their actions in order to be able to continue to exploit the forests.

Some years ago the Christian newspaper *Times of Papua New Guinea* had such a role and was feared by all those involved in chopping down forests, taking bribes and using their influence to cover these crimes. But the newspaper no longer exists. It had to close for financial reasons, a fate of too many prophetic Christian media in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific.

Local churches and funding organisations have to be challenged and have to be made aware that local Christian media can play a decisive role in the defence of the environment

and that media that really take on such a responsibility need both moral and financial support.

There are many other examples of Christian publications committed to contributing to the preservation of our globe. The All Africa Conference of Churches published a book in preparation for its Ninth General Assembly in 2008 (*Africa Steps Forth in Faith*) with a long article written by Professor Jesse Mugambi, a prominent Christian scholar on theology, economic and ecological issues. In 'Environment and Spirituality' he relates environmental challenges with biblical messages and Christian convictions. His vision for the future is relevant beyond Africa:

African Christian ecology has yet to emerge, and it is long overdue. We have much from the ancient church traditions in Ethiopia, in which the shrines of worship were blended with the natural environment with remarkable ingenuity. The ingredients of an African ecology will include blending our liturgies with the rhythm of our tropical seasons, blending our Christian rituals with our local ecology, and linking responsible leadership with stewardship for the local natural environment. These insights can be translated in our programmes of actions, with the involvement of Christian individuals and communities at the levels of the congregation, the parish and the diocese. Ecumenically, it is possible for such programmes of action to be implemented across denominations, in order to rehabilitate the environment for the present and future generations.

It is obvious, that such an ambitious programme needs Christian media that not only reprint articles on ecological problems or publish sermons with reference to ecological challenges from time to time. To begin with, it is necessary for editors, journalists and authors to relate environment and faith in more than a superficial way. They need a profound understanding of global and local ecological processes, of the Bible and theological interpretations of biblical stories as well as Christian traditions and Christian life in their area – and they have to be able to communicate how these dimensions of life are linked. Maybe it is not surprising that a number of Christian publications fail in this attempt or give up before they even try to cope with this challenge.

Articles linking faith and concrete environmental problems can cause tension even within churches, since church members may be responsible for some of these problems and scandals and are now challenged not only by NGOs but also by people who criticise these problems based on their religious beliefs. This puts Christian communicators in the middle of conflicts in society and local congregations. Polluting a river is not only scientifically proven or politically criticised (both are important!) but it is also exposed as an issue of Christian faith.

Networking for the environment

Belief in the one God and the Gospel has got an increasing number of evangelical Christians all over the world to take an active role in the struggle for the protection of creation. North American evangelicals have formed the 'Evangelical Environmental Network' in order to 'educate, inspire, and mobilize Christians in their efforts to care for creation, to be faithful stewards of God's provision, and to advocate for policies that honour God and protect the environment'.

The network publishes the *Creation Care* magazine. In one of the articles of the issue of Fall 2008, Peter Illyn advocates 'A Covenant with Creation' and writes: 'The theology of protecting species is unambiguous: Plants and animals have an inherited right to be fruitful and to thrive as God has commanded them.' Sometimes faith-based convictions are simple and at the same time radical in their consequences.

The article quotes a statement of the Southern Baptists, one of the very conservative churches in the US: 'We must care about environment because of our love for God. This is not our world, it is God's. Therefore, any damage we do to this world is an offence against God Himself. We share God's concern for the abuse of his creation.' Similarly, the magazine examines the programmes of the then Presidential candidates Obama and McCain, concluding

that Obama's 'vigorous, specific commitment to sustainable living through clean, efficient energy' is praised.

In another article the author Matthew Sleeth explains in detail how he and his family became alert to ecological issues after reading the Bible and learning: 'Creation care is at the very core of our Christian walk.' And therefore the family changed its lifestyle dramatically. The title of the article is 'The Bible on Being Green'.

In another article the global challenges of 'Environmental Emigration' are explained. And in all the articles deep Christian beliefs are related to environmental problems. The time has past when only or primarily ecumenically oriented Christians were committed to protecting God's creation – and the ways in which some evangelical media convey their message of the Christian responsibility for creation are very challenging for ecumenical media.

One consequence of these observations should be to rethink the direction and content of Christian publications and to put more emphasis on alternative, quality journalism. While Christian publications in many countries cannot be blamed for ignoring ecological issues, there seems to be a tendency to follow the 'agenda of the world' two or three steps behind and to take up issues that have already been discussed in secular media instead of setting the agenda for the ecological debate.

There are no indications that church publications in many countries raised the problems of climate change earlier than other media though one can argue that the responsibility to care for God's creation demands that Christians should be very alert to all potential dangers that threaten our globe.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is one of the few exceptions. WCC did a lot of study and advocacy work on climate change and published a number of booklets long before it became one of the topical issues in international debate. But why were member churches so reluctant to take up this issue ten or fifteen years ago? It can be argued with good reason that Christian media should put much more emphasis on raising ecological issues instead of repeating what can be read in other media.

To write stories that relate ecology and faith in a serious way yet taking into account the local context is very demanding. To live up to these expectations Christian communicators need a profound knowledge of ecological and religious issues – and they need the courage to write what they have realised.

In the Old Testament such communicators were called prophets, and it is well known that they were often persecuted by the powers that be. In the protection of forests, lakes and rivers prophetic Christian communication is desperately needed.

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