

“Hearing the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor”

23 October 2024

The Ecumenical Eco-Bishops and Church Leaders Conference

We the undersigned faith leaders, eco-bishops, as well as members of the SACC Climate Commission and youth climate activists, gathered in Noordhoek, Cape Town on 21 - 23 October 2024, for an Eco-Bishops Conference organised by SAFCEI, Green Anglicans, and the Centre for Public Witness. We come from eleven different Christian denominations from the following countries: South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, and Eswatini.

Together, we listened to the groaning of Creation, hearing the cry of the Earth and that of the poor and marginalized.

Climate Change Realities

Temperatures in a shack may be more than ten degrees higher than in the leafy suburbs (1)

A tipping point of long term drought could lead to collapse of maize harvest in Southern Africa (2)

Johannesburg faces its own Day Zero for water (3)

The East Coast of Southern Africa is vulnerable to Category 5 level hurricanes (4)

Southern Africa is warming at about double the global average (5)

We mourn and deplore the inequalities in waste management which leave the vulnerable living in piles of filth; the waste of the precious gift of living water, our baptismal element; and the lack of dignity suffered by those without adequate sanitation.

We deplore mining methods that have exploited the poor, divided families, and poisoned the water and soil; widespread agricultural farming that have created monocultures, killing the soil with chemical fertilizers and pesticides; and the overfishing and plastic pollution of the oceans that threaten marine life. We mourn the loss of biodiversity and unraveling of the web of life.

We grieve the impact of coal-powered (fossil fuels) energy on air pollution and the health of the vulnerable; and the inappropriate use of land for development in places, such as wetlands.

We confess our rampant abuse of Earth's natural resources leading to climate change and environmental degradation for future generations.

We declare the centrality of environmental and climate justice to our Christian faith, with respect to:

- Creation and God's first commandment to us - to care for creation (Gen 2: 15) "work the land and look after it"
- The human sin of greed and consumption beyond the limits (Gen 3)
- God's gift of salvation for all creation in and through Jesus Christ (John 3:16 in Greek "God so loved the cosmos")
- The assurance of his resurrection and the promise of new birth and renewal of this earth (Rom 8:22 - creation is groaning in childbirth)
- Our calling to serve as co-creators with God in restoring creation
- The need to strive for equity and justice for all life and future generations (Isa 42:1-4)
- Our calling to be agents of reconciliation and restored relationships with God, each other and all creation (2 Cor 5:17-19)

Although Creation has waited too long, we recognize that the children of God are beginning to rise to the environmental challenges and we celebrate the actions being taken (Rom 8:19).

We commit ourselves to act in the areas of spirituality, local action and advocacy.

Spirituality

We commit to celebrating the Season of Creation (1st Sep to 4th Oct) as an annual ecumenical celebration and to integrating Care for Creation into our overall liturgy, teaching and actions.

We commit to working together ecumenically and sharing eco-theology resources.

Local actions

We call on our churches to humble themselves and pray, confessing our contribution to environmental degradation and asking for the Spirit of God to touch the hearts of politicians, business leaders as well as world leaders concerning the causes and consequences of climate change and environmental degradation. (2 Chron 7:14)

We will exercise our pastoral integrity to encourage behavioural changes for the well-being of the environment

We will encourage our churches to practice a ministry of presence and listening, including learning from indigenous knowledge.

We commit to creating spaces for courageous conversations and capacity building about climate change and energy related issues and their impact on local communities.

We commit to preparing for climate and natural disasters, adopting risk-reduction and risk-mitigation strategies as an ecumenical community. Recognising the impact of socio-economic inequities on the ability to cope with disaster, we encourage training in procedures for all sectors so that they might respond competently and become disaster-ready communities.

We commit to growing indigenous trees and shrubs in all communities but in particular to combat heat in urban densely populated areas, reduce air pollution, and increase biodiversity, working in liaison with the National Departments of Forestry and the Environment.

We commit to encouraging and empowering food sovereignty taking into account socio-economic and environmental issues.

We call on church members and churches to minimize their carbon footprint by reducing energy usage and exploring alternative energy sources.

We commit to reducing single-use plastic and empowering communities to combat poor waste management.

We commit to empowering children and youth as eco-champions. We encourage our young people to get involved in the ministry of the Climate Yes! (Youth ecumenical summit).

Advocacy

With deep awareness of their global impact and profound concern for the suffering caused to the poor by:

- energy derived from fossil fuels and false energy solutions to climate change
- widespread industrial farming that kills the soil over extensive tracts of land and results in deforestation, as well as mass animal husbandry and its contribution to global warming.

We encourage the church to create channels for the authentic voices of those impacted by Climate Change to be heard, "enhancing and creating the means for the voiceless to speak for themselves". (6)

We celebrate the formation of the Climate Justice Commission of the SACC and encourage other national Councils of Churches to address issues of Climate Change.

We urge the Church to speak out with a prophetic voice in ecumenical solidarity to Government and corporate entities calling for radical changes in policy and practice to mitigate these global issues that threaten the future of the Earth.

We call on the government to promote jobs creation through local production rather than imports of solar panels and other materials used for renewable energy. We call on the government and the private sector to invest in and support young entrepreneurs developing climate friendly products, and to provide capacity building for the renewable sector.

We reject the inclusion of additional coal in the IRP (Integrated Resource Plan), which violates human rights and the future of Southern African youth. We support the youth who are spearheading a legal battle against the government over climate change, and demanding that new coal be removed from South Africa's energy future. (7)

We commit to the protection of marine life, especially endangered species such as the African penguin. (8) And we continue to stand against seismic blasting of the oceans for oil exploration, among many other examples of our human abuse of Earth's natural resources. (9)

Conclusion

We call on all our faith communities and all people of good will to recognise our responsibility to care for God's creation.

"Choose life! Then you and your children will live." (Deut 30:19)

References:

(1)Dailymaverick.co.za, 2024. **Thermal inequalities: Cape Town heat mapping reveals huge temperature differences between districts.** <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-06-20-thermal-inequalities-cape-town-heat-mapping-reveals-huge-temperature-differences-between-districts/>

(2)Wits.ac.za, 2024. **Facing climate change head-on.** <https://www.wits.ac.za/curiosity/stories/facing-climate-change-head-on.html>

(3)Dailymaverick.co.za, 2024. **Water crisis: Johannesburg skirts Day Zero for fourth time in a year.** <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-10-10-water-crisis-johannesburg-skirts-day-zero-for-fourth-time-in-a-year/>

(4)Dailymaverick.co.za, 2023. **Southern Africa at increased risk of being hit by powerful Category 5 cyclones.** <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-11-02-southern-africa-at-increased-risk-of-being-hit-by-powerful-category-5-cyclones/>

(5) Csiir.co.za, 2024. **Heat vulnerability index: Interactive GIS platform.** <https://pta-gis-2-web1.csiir.co.za/portal/apps/GBCascade/index.html?appid=b161b2f892194ed5938374fe2192e537>

(6) Cardinal S. Brislin, 2024. Conference keynote address. **“The importance of Laudato Si for Southern Africa”**

(7) Dailymaverick.co.za, 2024. **Not without a fight: Young activists take Mantashe, Nersa to High Court over new coal power plans.** <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-10-10-not-without-a-fight-young-activists-take-mantashe-nersa-to-high-court-over-new-coal-power-plans/>

(8) Oceanographicmagazine.com, 2024. **Fight or plight: Saving African penguins from the brink of extinction.** <https://oceanographicmagazine.com/news/fight-or-plight-saving-african-penguins-from-the-brink-of-extinction/>

(9) Groundup.org.za, 2024. **Court asked to stop Shell's seismic tests once and for all.** <https://groundup.org.za/article/court-asked-to-stop-shells-seismic-tests-once-and-for-all/>

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Denomination