



A great responsibility

Rev Dr Brian Phillips provides an insightful take on the relationship between stewardship, sustainability and creation. This article is one in a series submitted by the Uniting Church SA Environment Action Group.

In today's society, 'sustainability' has become a buzz word. 'Is the business sustainable?' 'Is China's growth sustainable?' 'Is this congregation (or this ministry) sustainable?'

Sustainability is often taken as being merely an economic concept, but there is much more to it than that. The health and resilience of our social fabric are also crucial elements – whether it refers to a struggling congregation, a giant nation state like China or a business looking to be successful within its social environment.

Economic and social sustainability are both necessary, but alone they are not sufficient. We must also consider environmental sustainability. Without an environment healthy enough to sustain them, there can be no nation, no business, no faith community, and no life. This is so obviously true that we are often blind to its importance.

The 'environment' provides us with clean air, drinkable water, fertile soil, rain and essential minerals. Without a supportive environment there is no life! This is true not only for humans, but for the millions of species of living plants and animals, which can survive only in the right conditions. When those conditions change, species disappear. We see this illustrated all over the world – the orangutans in Java, fish stocks in the oceans, tigers in South East Asia, pandas in China, just to name a few. There have been approximately 130 extinctions of birds, amphibians and mammals in Australia in the last 200 years, and roughly 20% of the remaining mammals are also in danger of extinction.

Human beings continue to be the most destructive of all species on earth. We destroy precious resources like rainforests, pollute the oceans with a current total of 270,000 tonnes of throw-away plastic, dump the by-products of our fossil fuel-burning lifestyles into the air, and destroy the habitat of many living creatures – often disregarding the consequences of our actions. The way we treat our natural environment is a pressing moral issue.

The whole, wondrous universe is here because it has been loved into existence by One who is beyond our richest imagination. Love brought this beautiful planet into being – its wondrous, complex systems where nothing exists alone, where everything is part of a network of giving and receiving. When we take and take and take, disregarding the relationships between the earth, the atmosphere, oceans and rivers, plants and animals, we are in denial about our own and our earth's origins. To wilfully degrade this creation is to wound God.

Even now, the world is consuming resources one and a half times faster than we can sustain. How we live on this earth needs to be addressed. Every time we buy more stuff, we might ask ourselves, do we really need this? Every time we buy food or goods imported from another country, we might remember the fossil fuel consumed in shipping it to us. Every time we discard superseded or obsolescent gadgets, we could pause to reflect on what this waste of resources means for the earth and for future generations. By considering these things, we can become more conscious of how the way we choose to live affects the environment. We can be alert to the pleas from poorer nations who are already suffering the consequences of the developed world's profligacy. And we can remember that future generations – our children and grandchildren – are going to live tomorrow with the consequences of our choices today.

Being responsible stewards of the wondrous gift of this earth is not an easy task, but it is one we are called to attempt.

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