

Portland Mennonite Church
Statement on Climate Change and the Environment

1. PURPOSE OF THIS STATEMENT

The ongoing progression of climate change and the increasingly degraded condition of the Earth's environment are important and urgent issues with strong connections to Mennonite faith and values. This statement provides those concerned about climate change and other environmental issues with a brief, point-by-point narrative of what these phenomena are, why they are happening, and how we should respond. This narrative is intended to provide an overview and framework for thinking about and dealing with these issues as well as pointing out their connections to our faith.

2. SITUATION: DEGRADATION OF THE EARTH

Every part of the physical and living environment of the Earth is experiencing major disruption and degradation due to human activities. Recognition of this goes back many decades, yet these problems persist and in most ways are getting worse. Climate change is the biggest, most recent, and perhaps most widely publicized such impact, but all other components of the Earth system are adversely affected as well, including water, air, soil, oceans, glaciers and ice caps, forests, plants, and animals. This degradation now poses great danger and even threatens the continuance of life on our planet (1).

3. BELIEFS

3a. Mennonite beliefs and values. As Mennonites, we find the current state of the Earth to be counter to our core beliefs and values, including simplicity, community, justice, and peace. Care for the Earth connects directly with our long tradition of being farmers.

3b. A sacred Earth. We believe that the Earth is God's creation and, as such, is sacred. As the home of all known life, it is worthy of care and respect. The Earth is our home, and we need to be good stewards of it.

3c. Response. Our faith calls us to respond to the crisis of the Earth. We feel the responsibility to understand what is going on, why this is happening, and what we can do to improve the situation.

4. CAUSES

4a. Human relationship to the Earth. Humans have always made use of the resources of the Earth to support life, and this has gone on for many millennia. However, especially since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century, humans have increased their impact on the Earth and have sought to dominate, exploit, and control nature. The intention has been to supply human needs and enhance human life, and many improvements have indeed been made. But along the way, the scale of the interventions into the workings of natural processes, the resource extraction, and the resulting pollution and ecosystem disruption has reached such a magnitude as to be unsustainable and to threaten the functioning of the Earth as a life support system. We are in "overshoot" (2), extracting and consuming resources faster than they can be naturally replenished, thereby drawing down the "natural capital" (3) of the Earth. Regarding the Earth as an object of domination and a pool of resources to exploit while seeking unending economic growth on a finite planet has resulted in its degradation.

4b. Direct causes. Environmental degradation is a result of human activities of production and consumption, affecting every aspect of the Earth's physical and living systems. Direct causes of this degradation are the immediate, first-level activities that impair an element of the Earth system. Examples include:

- * *Carbon dioxide emissions from burning fossil fuels*
causing climate change and all of its consequences (more intense storms, drought, weather extremes, less snow, melting glaciers and polar ice caps, sea level rise, crop failures, etc.)
- * *Urbanization, deforestation, and other land use conversions*
causing biodiversity loss and species endangerment
- * *Dams*
causing fish population declines
- * *Industrial agriculture*
causing soil erosion, degradation of soil health, water pollution, and pesticide poisoning
- * *Mining*
causing land surface destruction and water pollution
- * *Factories, automobiles, and electricity production*
causing air pollution

Many more examples could be cited. Direct causes are themselves caused by underlying forces motivating these destructive activities.

4c. Underlying causes. The motivations for the human activities comprising the direct causes of environmental degradation are themselves rooted in our industry, technology, energy use, economic

system, social system, population growth, consumption, lifestyle, and worldview. These system elements and dynamics stem primarily from the developments during the Industrial Revolution and on to today. All of these elements interact to encourage and even require the large-scale and ever-increasing resource extraction and energy utilization that leads to environmental degradation.

5. SOLUTIONS

5a. Mitigation and adaptation. Solutions fall into two basic categories. Mitigation denotes activities intended to reduce environmental disruptions so that the natural systems can recover their function and thereby reduce the threat of harm. For example, mitigation of climate change involves reducing carbon dioxide emissions. Adaptation, on the other hand, denotes activities that accept the inevitability of environmental disruption and simply seek ways to adapt to it and carry on with life. For example, coastal cities might adapt to climate change by building structures to protect against sea level rise.

5b. A new relationship to the Earth. To address climate change and environmental degradation and to restore and maintain the integrity of the Earth, we must begin by adopting a new relationship to it, a new consciousness, one that allows us to live in harmony and balance with nature, to reduce our consumption of resources, and to protect the Earth's viability into the indefinite future -- in other words, to live at peace with the Earth.

5c. Awareness. We need to be aware of all of the direct and underlying causes that contribute to climate change and environmental degradation. It does require commitment to do so, as it can take considerable effort to find the relevant information, and it can be difficult to recognize all the economic and social forces at play. It can also be difficult because many of these effects and connections are not obvious and are hidden from view. In addition, many of these effects are embedded so deeply into our economic and social systems that it can be very difficult to avoid the negative impacts (4). Our systems have many environmental and social "externalities" (5), that is, costs (not only economic costs, but also environmental pollution, negative health impacts, etc.) that are not reflected in the price of goods but are borne by other people or the environment (a justice issue in addition to an environmental one). It is easy not to be aware of and think about these effects. Nevertheless, solutions to environmental and social problems require such awareness and effort.

5d. Systems thinking. Because climate change and all other environmental degradations have multiple interacting direct and underlying causes, solutions must take them all into account and address them as a system. Solutions devised with only a narrow focus or aim at only direct causes and single objectives have a significant risk of being ineffective or even counterproductive in the larger system (6). Effective and sustainable solutions must be crafted in the context of broad system interactions, including not just applications of new technologies but also behavioral changes.

5e. Government / corporate actions (top-down). Governments and corporations could do much to provide leadership in addressing climate change and other environmental issues. Governments, however, are constrained by the political acceptability of proposed actions, while corporations are constrained by the dynamics of a free-market capitalist economy. Nevertheless, governments and corporations, with appropriate societal approval and scientific foundations, could set the tone and provide the political and financial support for efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change and other environmental issues.

5f. Individual action (bottom-up). Even if governments and corporations provide little leadership, individuals always have the ability to act on their own in support of the values they embrace. In a consumer capitalist economic system, individuals can strive to ensure that their purchases and level of consumption intentionally align with their environmental and social values. To do so, however, requires the effort of awareness, that is, learning about the products they purchase, the resources and energy they consume, where and under what circumstances products are made, how far they are shipped, etc. By steering consumption in such an intentional and committed way, despite the hindrances in doing so posed by social pressures or physical infrastructure (7), it is possible for individuals to exert great influence on the products available in the marketplace and therefore on the environmental and social impacts of economic activity.

5g. Mutual assistance. Despite efforts to slow climate change and ameliorate other environmental degradation, so far they are vastly insufficient to prevent continued impairment of natural systems. This inevitability of climate change and ongoing environmental degradation will lead to increasing numbers of people being adversely affected. These people will need help and may even be forced to migrate from their homes. Providing such help is a task we should be prepared for, which is especially relevant to the Mennonite faith with such a strong tradition of disaster relief and mutual aid.

6. COMMITMENT

6a. Faith. Our faith compels us to act to help heal the Earth and to align our lifestyle and its environmental and social consequences with the ethics and values we claim to uphold. We do the right thing because it is the right thing, regardless of whether we feel assured that it will change the world. We will renew and strengthen our commitment to Mennonite values as they apply to responding to the climate and environmental crises.

6b. Hope. Climate change, environmental degradation, and related social problems may seem overwhelming, but we maintain hope that they can be addressed. We hope that our actions can make a difference and that we can encourage others to join us in our efforts. We hope that we can help lay the foundation for a healthier, wiser, and more sustainable future.

6c. Love. We adhere to these values in love for both humanity and for the Earth, all being God's creations. We wish to live at peace with the Earth.

Footnotes:

1. An excellent report recently issued by the United Nations Environment Programme describes in more detail the Earth's situation and many of the other points summarized in the rest of this statement:

Making Peace With Nature: A Scientific Blueprint to Tackle the Climate, Biodiversity and Pollution Emergencies
<https://www.unep.org/resources/making-peace-nature>

2. Overshoot. This concept is from the Ecological Footprint Analysis, which calculates two metrics: the World Footprint and Earth Overshoot Day. The World Footprint is the land area equivalent of all human consumption. As of 2020, the World Footprint indicates that we would require 1.6 earths to sustainably support the existing level of consumption (and if everyone consumed at the rate of North Americans, we would require 5 earths). Earth Overshoot Day expresses the same concept as the calendar day of the year in which world consumption reaches 1.0 earths; as of 2020, this date is 22 August. Source:

<https://www.footprintnetwork.org/our-work/ecological-footprint/>

3. Natural capital. Economics terminology meaning the world's stock of natural resources. Similar in concept to stocks of financial capital or the account balance in a bank.

4. This situation can also be called "technological lock-in." For example, in our society, it is nearly impossible not to use an automobile, with all of its attendant environmental issues, because our road system and community layout have been designed around the automobile. Similarly, in the past three decades, the use of personal computers, the internet, servers, and mobile phones, with all of their attendant material resource requirements and energy usage, have become so commonplace that avoiding this source of environmental impact is essentially impossible.

5. Externalities. A standard economic concept whereby costs are imposed onto someone or something else other than the one purchasing a good. These costs are not reflected in the price of the goods. All of the various environmental degradations that we note would be considered to be externalities. That is, the costs of these environmental "side effects" are not considered in the marketplace and are borne by the environment and society in general. Similarly, social externalities would include economically impoverished people and marginalized communities of color suffering more pollution than others (a main issue of interest in the field of environmental justice), declines of local economies due to large chain or online stores and long-distance shipping, and other economic and social disruptions of the lives of individuals or communities.

6. As a recent example, solutions to climate change, at least as depicted by the media, politicians, and environmental groups, suffer from this oversimplification and narrow focus. Such solutions usually focus only on technological applications and carbon dioxide emissions rather than looking at the complete environmental impact of new energy sources or questioning the sustainability of a high-consumption, high-energy lifestyle. Without considering the energy system as a whole and the gamut of worldwide environmental issues associated with energy generation (including nonrenewable materials for wind turbines, solar panels, and storage batteries as well as the carbon footprint of these devices), policies could be adopted and infrastructure built that will cause their own negative impacts and could lead to the next environmental crisis. While political or practical necessities make it attractive to attack problems bit by bit, such a strategy is dangerous; a comprehensive and farsighted systems approach is needed to ensure robust and sustainable solutions.

7. Social pressures lead people to do what others around them do and what the dominant culture considers "normal." This includes adoption of a certain level of consumption and the use of products that consume materials and energy, all of which have environmental and social impacts but are either considered to be unavoidable or are ignored. Examples of hindrances posed by physical infrastructure include those given in footnote 4 (i.e., the "technological lock-in" and unavoidable environmental impacts of automobiles and computers/internet/servers/mobile phones.)