

## A Faithful Commitment to Sustainability at Messiah College

Our commitment to creating a more sustainable campus community is an outgrowth of both our Christian faith and our institutional mission of promoting reconciliation, which in its truest form, must expand the boundaries of community to include reconciliation between human and ecological communities. As a Christian College, our action to prepare ecological citizens and mitigate the impacts of our ecological footprint are rooted in a long held Christian belief and scripture's call to creation care as well as a deep concern for ecological and human degradation that occurs when God's vision of land stewardship is not practiced.

Throughout the Creation narrative of Genesis, God created and saw his creation as "good," and tasked human beings to be caretakers of this land. God's very first blessing in scripture is not saved for the human race, but for the birds of the air and fish of the sea. God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth."<sup>1</sup> Immediately following this passage, God creates Adam and Eve with the special identity as image bearers. The idea of *imago dei* in Genesis (1.26) is followed by "let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." This oft-cited passage is used to justify creation's manipulation and destruction; however, Biblical scholars such as Ellen Davis argue that the Jewish understanding of dominion is not destructive, but protective. To be *imago dei* is to steward and nurture the creation, and the garden scene in Genesis 2 amplifies this responsibility. Davis argues that early Jews would have understood dominion as exercising skilled mastery *among* instead of *over* the created order, ensuring that the very first blessing uttered into existence is protected.<sup>i</sup>

In the New Testament, Ephesians 2.10 builds on the idea of *imago dei* and its fulfillment in Christ, "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." Ephesians is concerned with the building of the church and its role in God's redemptive story, and Paul does so by building on *imago dei*. The good work God prepares for us as image bearers is the work of redemption, of co-creation, of stewardship, and living in community with both the human and natural world. As Wendell Berry reminds us, "how we take our lives from this world, how we work, what work we do, how well we use the materials we use, and what we do with them after we have used them – all these are questions of the highest and gravest religious significance. In answering them, we practice or do not practice our religion."<sup>ii</sup>

In addition to providing instruction in living as caretakers of the land rooted in the Imago Dei, the Biblical writers called out against those who chose to veer from that path, and implored Israel to be reconciled to the land. Warnings against the destructive behavior that we've grown accustomed to in our modern world is not new. Jeremiah (4:23-26; 17:4), reminds Israel that when the responsibility to land is forgotten the world can become a desolate place void of people and wildlife. Furthermore, the earlier writers of the law offered warning that if we abused our role as caretakers of the land, the land would not fulfill its divine mandate to produce (Lev. 26). However, in true redemptive fashion, we are not left with destruction as our only option. Remembering God's gift of good land and repenting for destructive behavior offers hope to humanity (Psalm 85).

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1.22

These passages (and many others), as well as a long Judeo-Christian tradition show that creation care and stewardship are part of the values of Christian faith. While campus sustainability has been a rising trend, Messiah's efforts are not merely an effort to compete with current sustainability trends in the market place of higher education or a gesture to appease the popularity of environmentalism. Our institutional values, rooted in a faithful reading of scripture and tradition require us to participate in shaping sustainable human communities, now and into the future.

Messiah College understands the term sustainability to be rooted in ecological conservation, social equity, and economic strength. John Elkington's 1994 development of the triple bottom line<sup>2</sup> (Environment, Economy, Social Justice) and Jullian Ageyman's 2003 definition of "just sustainability" are both strong influences for our campus sustainability culture. As such, the College defines sustainability as, "The need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems."<sup>iii</sup> These definitions of sustainability help unpack the College's focus on issues of climate change, biological and cultural diversity, and environmental justice, all of which fall under the umbrella of sustainability.

It is well documented that climate is changing, and that humans are the primary cause of this change. The fourth National Climate Assessment reports that the average surface air temperature has increased 1.8° Fahrenheit and that human activity, primarily carbon dioxide, is the dominant cause.<sup>iv</sup> While there are slight disagreements about what this warming specifically means for the global community, it is largely agreed upon that without a clear greenhouse gas mitigation strategy, life on the planet will be more difficult in the future with higher sea levels, more extreme temperature variations, and stronger storms affecting community wellbeing, food supply, and safety.<sup>v</sup>

Our community extends beyond the people associated with our campus to include the rest of our biotic community. When we fail to broaden our scope of community in this way, we directly participate in an era of species loss perpetrated by humans not seen in the last 65 million years.<sup>vi</sup> When human institutions cause damage to the natural world on this scale, affecting billions of people around the world, our very human identity and our ability to recognize the identity of others is hampered. The health and diversity of the plants and animals that inhabit our campus directly impacts the well-being of Messiah College's ecosystem, and we must preserve the health of our campus's natural environment as part of a larger expression of care for our global human and ecological communities.

Lastly, we must acknowledge the most vulnerable human communities experience the worst of ecological degradation<sup>vii</sup>. Understood as environmental justice, environmental resources, scarcity, and degradation is disproportionately distributed between communities along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. Over exploitation of natural resources related to industrial activities create a myriad of excessive burdens on both current and future generations, and those who are already marginalized or vulnerable will bear the burden.<sup>viii</sup> We must recognize our campus' implicit participation in this unjust system, and work to change our impact on marginalized human communities.

With these in mind, our position as an institution of higher education provides a unique platform in the efforts at building more socially equitable and ecologically sensitive communities. In one aspect, we have the duty of educating our students about how to lead globally aware and environmentally

---

<sup>2</sup> Elkington's triple bottom line definition of sustainability is when an action protects the natural world, grows the economy, and enhances social wellbeing

responsible lives, even if their eventual occupations do not directly intersect with social or environmental services. In another aspect, we cannot, with integrity impart such awareness to our students without also tangibly modeling sustainable practices on our own campus. Lastly, our responsibility to the broader community to be a resource and partner for creating and advancing sustainability knowledge and practice is an essential component of creating more socially and ecologically just communities. A truly campus wide commitment to sustainability, therefore, influences our academic, operational, and co-curricular spheres.

The deep connections between human and ecological wellbeing and the realities of environmental and social degradation are pressing issues facing our global society. Messiah's response to these realities is rooted in our faithful call to restoration as outlined in Scripture and our institutional identity rooted in the Brethren In Christ tradition.

Providing early leadership to campus sustainability, President Phipps, signed the American Colleges and Universities Presidents Climate Commitment (henceforth known as the Climate Commitment) in 2007, which committed the College to become carbon neutral by the year 2050. The Climate Commitment was a catalyst for much of the campus sustainability efforts seen on campus today. Shortly after signing, the College established an Office of Sustainability, installed a solar thermal array on N. Complex, planted the Grantham Community Garden, and in 2008 assessed the College's greenhouse gas emissions for the first time.

The accomplishments since 2007 are significant, and can be seen throughout the campus community; however, we must broaden our scope and recommit to the work of creating a socially and ecologically just campus community. Ten years after the initial 2007 commitment, the College assessed campus wide sustainability efforts using AASHE STARS<sup>3</sup> where a lot of growth was discovered, but more opportunities were to be had at integrating sustainability into the mission, identity, and planning of the College. The possibilities and expectations are numerous to further mitigate the impacts of climate change, protect biodiversity, manage campus waste, educate the campus community, consider our responsibility to marginalized communities, and facilitate and lead in public dialogue. As a result, the College is committed to the work of Sustainability by recognizing the realities of ecological degradation, acknowledging and educating about the unique role of humans in contributing to this degradation, and undertaking a plan to operate campus in a way to reduce these negative consequences.

\* Prepared by the Campus Sustainability Committee 2018-2019, and Affirmed by Messiah's President's Cabinet on April 1, 2019

---

<sup>3</sup> AASHE – Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education; STARS - Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Rating System. This tool outlines industry best practices and assesses the efficacy of an institution at achieving these best practices.

---

## End Notes:

<sup>i</sup> Davis, E. F. (2009). *Scripture, culture, and agriculture: An agrarian reading of the Bible*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>ii</sup> Berry, W. (1993). "Christianity and the survival of creation." In, *Sex, economy, freedom & community: Eight essays*. New York: Pantheon Books

<sup>iii</sup> Agyeman, J., & Evans, T. (2003). Toward just sustainability in urban communities: building equity rights with sustainable solutions. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 590(1), 35-53.

<sup>iv</sup> D.J., D.W. Fahey, et. al. (2017). Executive summary. In: *Climate Science Special Report: Fourth National Climate Assessment, Volume I* U.S. Global Change Research Program, Washington, DC, USA, pp. 12-34

<sup>v</sup> Hayhoe, K., et. al (2017). Climate models, scenarios, and projections. In: *Climate Science Special Report: Fourth National Climate Assessment, Volume I* U.S. Global Change Research Program, Washington, DC, USA, pp. 133-160

<sup>vi</sup> Leakey, R., & Lewin, R. (1996). *The sixth extinction: biodiversity and its survival*. New York: Anchor Books

<sup>vii</sup> Bullard, R. D. (2008). *Dumping in Dixie: Race, class, and environmental quality*. Westview Press.

<sup>viii</sup> Agyeman, J. (2013). *Introducing just sustainabilities: Policy, planning, and practice*. Zed Books Ltd..