



Rx for Mother Earth: How the Planet's Health is Affecting Our Own

By Rebekah Simon-Peter

About a year ago, my husband Jerry and I flew halfway around the world to the hot, humid islands of the Philippines. We were on our way to meet 16-year old Fad, a young woman we sponsor through Christian Foundation for Children and Aging (www.cfcausa.org).

This beautiful young woman, whose pictures graced our refrigerator for eight years, lived in the shadow of an urban garbage dump called Magic Mountain. So named because of its ability to provide income to people who live on the margins of society, this treacherous, towering heap of stink is perpetually enshrouded in a grey blanket of flies. If you can withstand the smell and negotiate the danger, you can supplement your income by picking through the garbage and reselling items found in the dump. And that's exactly what Fad's family, and so many others like hers, have to do.

Fad and her gracious family welcomed us into their concrete block home, embraced us, and out of their meager stores, fed us. We had the distinct feeling that it was we, not they, who had been bountifully blessed.

Eight months later, Tropical Storm Ketsana, the first of four typhoons to impact the Philippines in two months, hit Metro Manila. For nine hours the storm

dumped heavy rain—much of it concentrated on Fad's neighborhood and Magic Mountain. More than two million people were impacted. Over 240 people lost their lives. We waited anxiously for three months to learn if Fad and her family were among them. A month ago, we received a letter: thankfully, they had survived the storm. But sadly, some of the CFCA workers we met had not.

Unnatural Disasters

Natural disasters leave tragedy in their wake. But Tropical Storm Ketsana proved more of an unnatural disaster: bad weather + ubiquitous trash. It has left tragedy in its wake, yes. But even more, it ought to leave outrage. Much of the loss of life, damage, and displacement were preventable.

City drainage systems were so congested with garbage, tons of it and much of it plastic, that the rising waters could hardly recede. If the drainage systems had been clear, the flood waters would have been able to drain away. Instead, the densely populated city was flooded with murky waters containing every kind of refuse imaginable.

It wasn't Mother Nature that got out of hand with this storm. It was us. "Man's sins of social irresponsibility, neglect, opportunism, laziness, and lack of vision"¹ caused the devastation, according to

Bishop Benjamin Justo of the Philippines Annual Conference. Add to that list poor stewardship of the creation and you have the recipe for an unnatural disaster.

Ketsana is not the only unnatural disaster we have experienced lately. Consider Hurricane Katrina and Haiti's deadly earthquake, to name just two. In the first case, gale-force winds were buoyed by unnaturally warm gulf waters, a neglected levee system, and missing estuaries and wetlands that would have naturally absorbed the storm surge. In the second case, missing forests multiplied the mayhem.

Haiti is the most deforested country in the hemisphere, said Chloe Schwabe of the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program. Right before the earthquake, she reported, "there had been days of heavy rain that saturated the soil that did not have the benefit of trees to help soak up the water... this led to landslides and erosion. Many homes built on hillsides came crashing down during the quake."² Over 200,000 people lost their lives, due in part to chopped-down forests.

United Methodist Response

In disasters like these—both natural and unnatural—you can count on United Methodists and other persons of good faith to be on the scene in a jiffy. We have

an excellent reputation for responding to human suffering. We seek to provide or advocate for nutritious food, decent housing, meaningful work, and the power of self-determination for the billions who go without. We are taking real action toward eliminating malaria and trouncing AIDS.

Yet something essential is missing: caring for the earth itself. While our concerns encompass all of humanity and call us to a grand vision of a more just and equitable world, they do not go far enough. As long as we ignore the health and well-being of the earth, we will address only symptoms, not underlying causes. Ultimately, we'll leave the mechanisms of suffering in place.

Shirley Erena Murray's hymn "I Am Your Mother (Earth Prayer)" spells it out:

I am your lodging: Do not abuse me!
Tenderly use me, soothing my scars;
my health is your health, my wealth is
your wealth,
shining with promise, set among stars.³

Trying to take care of human health without attending to the earth that sustains us is like trying to build a house on sand, and we all know what Jesus said about that: it's foolish and unsustainable. (Matthew 7:24-27)

Mother Earth goes to a Health Fair

Imagine we could send Mother Earth to the local health fair to get a read on her overall health. What would we find? Breathing trouble, a toxic circulatory system, and a rising fever, among other things. It would be enough to land anyone else's mother in the ER or the ICU.

Let me explain. The lungs of the planet, the forests, are seriously compromised, with eighty percent of the planet's ancient forests already destroyed or damaged. Deforestation, a major cause of poverty, is also linked to greatly increased outbreaks of malaria, as well as global climate change. As part of our global health and anti-poverty efforts, we need to restore forests. The planet's breathing problems contribute to our own. Asthma cases are skyrocketing, especially among children.

Mother Earth's circulatory system is also in crisis. Oceans, seas, and rivers are deadened by massive fertilizer runoff, clogged with trash, poisoned by industrial chemicals, and massively overfished. What a challenge for people whose livelihood and diet come from the earth's waterways.

Even as the oceans have become our dumping grounds, so human blood now bears the imprint of industrialization. New studies reveal horrifying news: infants are born with industrial chemicals in their cord blood. Pollution is no longer a danger we encounter out there—it is lodged deep within us, even before birth.

Consider the earth's "skin" as well. Just as human skin helps regulate body temperature, earth's atmosphere does the same for the planet. But the atmosphere's cooling mechanisms have been hijacked by an increase in carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the upper reaches of the sky. In the past century, the atmosphere has warmed significantly.

In the same way that a fever can damage a body, earth's rising temperature is doing damage to earth's natural features and creatures. Witness the melting of glaciers and arctic sea ice, rising waters eroding coastal and island communities, more intense weather, and the drying out of soil. Global climate change, caused in large part by the burning of fossil fuels, is the culprit.

Who gets hurt the most? The poorest among us. And sometimes the oldest.

Climate change is implicated in the deaths of almost 39,000 Europeans in the summer of 2003. Most of the dead were elderly people who died of heatstroke and dehydration during heat waves that seared Northern Europe. When the temperature spiked at 122 in India that same year, 1400 people succumbed. Heat waves rolled across the U.S. in 2005 and 2006, claiming hundreds of lives, withering crops, sparking forest fires, and producing blackouts.

Rx for Mother Earth

In the face of a desperately ill Mother Earth that's also sickening life on earth, what's a church to do?

1. Pray for God's creation. Genesis 1, Psalms 8 and 104, Isaiah 24:3-5, 41:18-20, 44:3, 55:12-13, Colossians 1:15-17, Revelation 21:1-5 and 22:1-5 are natural scriptures from which to begin.
2. Start small. Adopt a park, clean up a roadside, nurture a garden, plant flowers and trees that attract wildlife. Small acts of stewardship nurture hope and foster awareness.
3. Go upstream. When considering how to respond to human suffering, look for environmental conditions that precede and exacerbate the impact of natural disasters. Is excess trash part of the equation? Deforestation? Missing

estuaries? Polluted waterways? Poor air quality? Climate change?

4. Partner with others. Follow the path of Christian Nobel Laureate, Dr. Wangari Maathai of Kenya and plant trees as a sign of the resurrection (www.greenbeltmovement.org). Support organizations like Plant with Purpose (www.plantwithpurpose.org) to help restore Haiti's forests.
5. Take a "Mother Earth Mission Trip." When you volunteer through Volunteers in Mission (VIM), turn some of your attention to the natural world around you. Work with locals to restore a forest, clean up a river, or teach stewardship of the creation from the Bible.

We got another letter from Fad yesterday, and despite the year's disaster, she sounded hopeful. Just like Fad, I can't live without hope. That's why I use as little plastic as possible—less to wash into the oceans and maybe wind up in Magic Mountain. It's also why I'm getting together with friends to plant trees as soon as spring comes. At the very least, it will be a sign of resurrection—for Mother Earth and all her inhabitants. □

- 1 *Christian Century*, November 3, 2009, "Churches: Human failures caused Manila floods."
- 2 <http://ecojustice.wordpress.com/2010/01/13/haiti-devastation-and-deforestation/>
- 3 "I Am Your Mother," by Shirley Erena Murray, © 1996 Hope Publishing Company. Used with permission in *The Faith We Sing*.



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A Sermon Starter from

RETHINK CHURCH

Rethink Healing (Acts 3:12-19)

And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you. (Acts 3:16)

Peter and John showed compassion to a man, healing him through the power of Jesus' name. The Israelites watched, astonished that these simple men, not learned or "holy" by standards of the day, could perform such a miracle. What if we believed God could bring healing and wholeness to the world through us?

Video Ideas

- The newest Rethink Church TV spot, which focuses on global health as its theme; find it at RethinkChurch.org.
- UMTV stories: "Free Health Supplies" (a Pennsylvania church provides health care equipment to low-income and uninsured people in the community); "Clinic Cures Community" (church starts clinic to help uninsured workers); "Bears Ease Burdens" (a church provides teddy bears to patients in hospitals nearby; bears attend worship and are prayed for before going into "duty")
- Movie clips: *The Green Mile* (healing comes from unlikely and sometimes scary sources); *A Civil Action* and *Erin Brockovich* (class action suits benefit many people suffering from chemically-induced diseases); *Patch Adams* (healing with humor and kindness)

Questions to Consider

- How can my faithful example bring healing and wholeness in individual lives, in my church, and in the community?
- What surprising means or persons might God want to use to bring healing?
- How can our church get more involved in healing ministries and programs in our community?

Possible Themes

- Healing through unexpected or painful means
- Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Inclusiveness
- Detour: finding a new way to get where you are going
- It's hard to heal alone—we need others to help us
- Some would rather die than do the hard work of healing
- Being healed of our "dis-ease"

Image Ideas

Pruning a tree, a washed out bridge, finding a new path, remembrance, dignity in sickness and old age.

Action Ideas

- Hold a forum for discussing health care issues
- Using resources like Wesley's *Primitive Physic* and Nouwen's *The Wounded Healer*, begin a study of health and wholeness with your congregation
- Sponsor a malaria education event and invite your congregation and community to learn more about malaria, which kills a child every 30 seconds.
- Raise funds to support Nothing But Nets: just \$10 sends a malaria net to a family in Africa. Encourage your children's ministry to make Nothing But Nets the focus of children's giving during Vacation Bible School

Resources for United Methodist congregations and conferences:
www.rethinkchurch.org

For those looking for their doorway to changing the world:
www.10thousanddoors.org



Adapted from United Methodist Communications' Rethink Church Sermon Starters, available at www.rethinkchurch.org/sermonstarters.

Find *Circuit Rider's* lectionary-based Sermon Starters online at www.circuitrider.com