

CHAPTER 11

## Getting to a New Progress

*"It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of the imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one."*

—Walter Brueggeman<sup>1</sup>

Creating a new understanding of progress is an ambitious, even audacious, task. But it is an unavoidable responsibility—"the great work" of our generation, to borrow from the title of Thomas Berry's most recent book. Changing our fundamental relationship to nature and redefining the purpose of our economies and obligations to other human beings is a far greater challenge than sending a man to the moon, cracking the human genome, or any other technological challenge ever undertaken, because it is more sweeping and because it involves changing the way people view the world and their place in it. It requires transforming what E. F. Schumacher has called "the people of the forward stampede" (those of us who are socialized to embrace the more, more, more version of progress) into "homecomers," people who re-value place, relationships, and other simple but profound pleasures in life.<sup>2</sup>

All sectors of society—government, business, the media, universities, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and all elements of civil society—will need to be engaged in this task. But because the shift is fundamentally about a change in values (from which appropriate technologies and policies will flow), the world's wisdom traditions will be

especially important partners. The world's religions understand and speak the values vernacular, and they help us define our place in the world. It is difficult to imagine success in building a new understanding of progress without their active engagement. Religions are the heavy hitters needed for such a massive societal transformation.

Rebuilding the ecological and well-being banks of the river of progress will take time and will likely vary from culture to culture. But it will surely deal with three main areas of activity: appreciating nature, building strong communities, and rethinking the way we consume.

### Appreciating Nature

To say that people in industrial countries are environmentally illiterate is to choose the wrong metaphor. The problem is not only that we lack the science; we are handicapped by a lack of intimacy with nature. Better to think of ourselves as environmentally orphaned, a people with little direct knowledge of the natural world that sustains us. Many of us, for example, may be hard pressed to name the three most common flowers, trees, and birds in our town. Or how much rainfall we get annually. Or what will happen to our region under scenarios of climate change. Because our contact with nature is often indirect—many of us spend a good part of our day indoors on computers and telephones, and get our food and other vital purchases out-of-package from retail outlets—it's easy to see how our lives are increasingly disconnected from the natural world.

A new progress will require that we be reintroduced to nature. "We will not fight to save what we do not love," wrote Harvard biologist Stephen Jay Gould in his argument that people form "an emotional and spiritual bond" between themselves and nature.<sup>3</sup> By helping believers appreciate the sacred dimension of nature, religions can teach us to love the environment around us. Faith-sponsored education on the environment (or Creation, or whatever term works best in each tradition) can help to build this affective connection to nature.

Some of this education can happen indoors, but religious institutions often have wonderful opportunities to ground it meaningfully in the natural environment itself. The Living Churchyards initiative in the U.K., which uses church property to allow the wild to flourish,

ish, is a good example of a field opportunity for a spiritual appreciation of nature. But many other examples exist as well. Since 1997, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) has sponsored a Sacred Land project, which promotes the use of gardens, wells, pilgrimage routes, trees, art and other religious assets to connect with the natural world. Walkers have established a path in Wales, for example, that connects 16 Cistercian monasteries, and which will become the longest footpath in Wales when it officially opens in 2008.<sup>4</sup> The Jamyang Buddhist Center in South London is planning to convert the parking lot of an abandoned property into a sacred garden.<sup>5</sup> And villagers in North Cornwall restored a "holy well" that dates at least to the 15th century as part of a Sacred Land grant.<sup>6</sup> Projects like those are wonderful ways not only to preserve the natural world, but to help congregants understand what that world is. Indeed, a year's worth of Earth Sundays and eco-kashrut practices will be of little use if we have no intimate understanding of what we are celebrating.

At the same time, it is helpful in many traditions to ensure that people are part of nature education as well. For traditions accustomed to dealing with issues of justice, but less accustomed to thinking of the sacred dimension of nature, it is perhaps helpful to make the human connection on environmental issues. Thus, the efforts of schools like Colegio Santa Maria in São Paulo to reach out to slum dwellers as part of its environmental education packs an inspirational double punch for students, teaching them to love neighbor and nature in a single effort.

Religious rituals and celebrations involve education of a different sort, a conversion of the heart and spirit. As such, they are another opportunity for congregants to learn to love the natural world. We have seen that Buddhist monks have "ordained" trees, and some Jews are interested in extending the ethical underpinnings of kashrut to include environmental values as ways of adapting tradition to modern circumstances. Episcopalians have for more than two decades celebrated the "Earth Mass" at New York's Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine on the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, which features a procession of animals down the aisle.<sup>7</sup> And Earth Sunday in April and Creation Sunday in September are now regular features of some

Christian liturgical calendars. All of these initiatives adapt existing rituals to embrace an environmental dimension.

Some congregations may be uncomfortable with such adaptations. They might instead consider ways to use standard rituals to highlight the value of a healthy environment. Many religions, for example, use water in ritual washings before prayers. It goes without saying that use of polluted water for this purpose would be sacrilegious: is it equally unacceptable to tolerate polluted rivers, lakes, and streams *outside* of worship? Or consider food rituals, such as the blessing before meals, or the Hindu tradition of *prasad*, the sacred ritual offerings of food.<sup>8</sup> Could these rituals be used to highlight the importance of food that is grown and delivered in a sustainable way?

### Creating Well-Being

Through their spiritual work and social services, religions strengthen the well-being of their members and the communities they live in. By running soup kitchens, clinics, orphanages, job assistance programs, and other social services, for example, they help to cover the basic needs—the bedrock of well-being—of society's poorest. They also support and encourage the more transcendent values at the high end of the well-being spectrum, like spiritual growth and freedom. Perhaps less appreciated are the contributions that congregations make to relationship building, a critically important value of well-being. Through their capacity to build strong internal communities, and through their connections to the larger communities in which they are rooted, congregations are important builders and sustainers of nurturing relationships. Guided by a new vision of progress, this community-building service could be more critical than ever.

In a world of growing oil scarcity and concerns about globalization, people may find increasing value in strengthening local economies. Congregations can help support local merchants through their institutional purchases and by influencing the purchases of individual congregants. The initiatives of the Interfaith Climate and Energy Initiative in Maine to support local farmers is a good example of this. Individual commitments to buying at least \$10 of food purchases per week

from local suppliers, and seasonal subscriptions with local farmers to purchase their produce, help ensure that farmers get local business and a higher share of each consumer's food dollar. Moreover, to the extent that community-supported agriculture (CSA) subscriptions are a congregational rather than individual initiative, CSAs can be a bonding experience for the church community. Myriad other ways to strengthen local economies are available to congregations, from local purchases of supplies, to support for a "living wage," to encouraging business initiatives that add value to local exports. By strengthening the ability of local communities to provide for themselves, congregations can help build resilient economies of well-being.

Religious groups can also be watchful for opportunities to strengthen families, the nucleus of all communities. Congregations and religious organizations can encourage government and business policies that offer leave for new parents, adequate annual vacation, and affordable daycare for working families. Initiatives like these can help families reclaim time, an increasingly scarce resource that is vital for strengthening and maintaining relationships.

Indeed, religious groups might consider weighing in on re-structuring the basic societal bargain of the 20th century, under which increases in business productivity are rewarded with higher wages, rather than the alternative: increased leisure time. The bargain of the last century raised living standards and gave people access to a cornucopia of goods. But it also led to increased environmental problems, higher levels of indebtedness, and for some, longer working hours to make ends meet. In societies that have already reached a high level of material prosperity, it may be time to open a dialogue about whether workers might be better served with more time off rather than higher wages as the reward for increased productivity. The benefits could be manifold: more time with family and friends, and lessened environmental impact that would accompany more moderate levels of spending.

### Rethinking our Material Lives

The great historian Arnold Toynbee once noted that the measure of a civilization's growth is not its capacity to build empires or raise liv-

ing standards, but the Law of Progressive Simplification: the capacity to spend more and more time and energy on the nonmaterial side of life.<sup>10</sup> In an age of rampant consumerism, this call to greatness may sound out of touch—but to people of faith, perhaps also comforting and familiar, given the importance of spirituality in religious traditions everywhere. The world's religions have the capacity to challenge their institutions and adherents to make Toynbee's vision a reality.

The place to start is to review existing consumption with an eye to making it efficient and ethical. Through their teaching and through their own purchases, congregations can highlight opportunities to purchase fair trade or organically produced goods; green energy; materials with a high level of recycled content; more efficient cars, appliances, and heating systems; and goods made by workers who receive a just wage. It is easy to forget that consumers hold real power to send a message of ethics and justice via the market, but houses of worship are in a strong position to remind us regularly to use this power well.

But consuming ethically is not the same as consuming less. Religious groups are also well positioned to help adherents reflect on their lifestyle and consider whether they would be better off simplifying their lives. Many people in industrial countries are overworked and indebted and lack time for family and friends. Many also complain that they have little time for spiritual reading, prayer, reflective walks, or other quiet activities that strengthen spiritual development. Living more simply could bring relief for all of these problems and considerably enhance personal well-being. And as people become more skilled at "downshifting," or living more simply, they are likely to have more time or money to offer to their community. In sum, simplifying can help us to shape lives of greater well-being, strengthen our communities, and improve the well-being of those less fortunate as well.

At some level, we know these arguments to be true, even attractive, but they are seldom compelling enough to persuade us to change our lifestyles. Consumerism has the grip of an addiction, and we need help to break it. It is ironic that houses of worship in the United States have been leaders for decades in offering 12-step programs in their basements as an outreach service to people fighting drug or alcohol

addiction. It may be time to offer a similar sustainability-related service to one's own congregation. The "simplicity circle" approach of the online Simple Living Network, while not a 12-step program, offers a creative mechanism for people to explore simplicity in a supportive and encouraging setting.<sup>10</sup> The circles could easily be adapted for use in congregations, and with the support of congregation leaders could be just the tool that moves congregants from thinking about simplicity to acting on it.

Congregations and religious organizations might also help people come to terms with the moral dimension of wealth, especially in prosperous countries where religious people are in a position to use their wealth to create a better world. This can happen through workshops and retreats like the ones offered by the aptly named Ministry of Money in Germantown, Maryland. Its retreats on Money and Faith, Kids and Money, and similar topics, along with pilgrimages to poor nations that bring congregants face to face with the realities of poverty, challenge prosperous people to think differently about their wealth in a non-judgmental and supportive setting.<sup>11</sup>

Religious groups could also ensure that congregations are aware of opportunities to leverage their wealth for good, through investment options that steer financing to those unserved by commercial banks. And clear goals for religious wealth could be discussed and set. Imagine, for example, if the concept of tithing were adapted for use with investments, so that 10 percent of a person's investments were directed to community development banks, microfinance organizations, and other entities that offer financing to organizations that help the poor. Redirecting wealth in this way could greatly increase the capital available to poor people for whom a lack of financing is the greatest obstacle to a better life. And it would give investors the satisfaction of knowing that their wealth is being leveraged for good far beyond their charitable giving.

Finally, religious groups can help critique the advertising and media influences that drive so many of our material cravings. Some are already active in this area: in one of his earliest statements as the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams expressed strong concern about the media and its impact on children, and a few churches and synagogues

are promoting TV Turnoff Week as a way to encourage congregants to shun the content of modern media and to strengthen ties with families and friends through non-media activities. But the faith community could have a much stronger impact if more leaders and organizations protested violence and sexual exploitation in television programming. A collective religious effort to set standards for advertising on children's programming, for example, could be a start in loosening the grip of consumerism on our culture.

### **Leveraging Religious Influence**

Beyond the specific activities that can create a new understanding of progress, the way religions go about this work can be important. By tapping religious assets, stressing the positive, collaborating when possible, and returning to the power of one's own tradition, it is possible to make major progress in educating about nature, building communities, and rethinking consumption.

#### *Tap Religious Assets*

Individual congregations are often one node in a huge network of religious bodies that might include regional, national, and international governing organizations; hospitals, schools, orphanages, and other social service groups; print, radio, and television offices; missionary, relief, and development organizations; and religiously-affiliated NGOs, to name just a few. And the network gets much larger when the web of one denomination or religion begins to make connections to the webs of others. Such networks have huge potential to leverage change, but they are likely underused, even from the perspective of a single religion or denomination.

Just as hierarchical religions use their centralized religious structures to set the teachings for an entire diocese, nation, or even the world, these structures can also be useful in disseminating sustainability policy across a wide area. The Diocese of Manchester in the U.K. does this with its environmental policy, issued in November 2003, which guides the operations of diocesan churches and is meant to be a model for individual lifestyles as well. The policy calls for efficient use of energy and water, adoption of renewable energy, com-

mitment to recycling and materials reuse, reliance on electronic rather than paper communications where possible, and minimizing travel, especially by automobile.<sup>12</sup>

Religious webs can also be used to advance ethical consumption, while saving money. Martin Palmer of ARC notes, for example, that the Anglican Church in the U.K. could use its "faith structure"—its network of assets—to green its churches and negotiate better purchasing contracts. With an estimated 38,000 buildings, the Church of England can approach green energy companies, sellers of recycled paper and fair trade coffee, and other ethically-oriented suppliers and ask for a package deal in return for the church's massive business. Overworked parish staffs have neither the time nor the clout to do such bulk purchasing on their own. And to the degree that ethical goods are more expensive—often the case with organic produce, green electricity, and other such goods—individual cash-strapped congregations could benefit from group purchasing that makes those goods more affordable. The more extended the network, of course, the better the deal that could be struck. In many countries, a religious purchasing network could be the single largest purchaser in some markets, after governments.

Sometimes the extended religious network is larger than people commonly realize. Reverend Jim Ball of the Evangelical Environmental Network notes that as EEN considers its work on climate change in the coming years, it is working with Christian relief and development organizations to ensure that they understand the issue and its implications for their work. "[For] any development project that's going to last more than five years, they need to factor in climate change. They need to plan for this, to adapt," Ball says. And because the relief agencies will be affected, he says, they have a direct interest in becoming involved in the policy and advocacy work. "We can try to get them involved in meetings on [Capitol] Hill, and get them to talk to their constituencies about this."<sup>13</sup>

#### *Stress the Positive*

The idea that restraint and limits are key to a sustainable future is a tough message to market, but it can be framed more positively. The

most important part of restraint is that it can facilitate greater creativity and well-being in the long run, just as good eating does. Diets are not marketed by emphasizing what a person cannot eat, but on the promise of greater energy, happiness, and self-esteem. In the same way, promotion of an ethic of bounded creativity should focus on the positive endgame of a new progress. Religions understand this, suggests ARC's Palmer, which is why seasons of sacrifice such as Lent, Ramadan, or Yom Kippur are not ends in themselves, but culminate in celebration.<sup>14</sup>

Environmental writer Bill McKibben, who is active in his local church, tells the story of the difficulty of getting fellow church members to embrace the "\$100 Christmas" program, which urged congregants to limit their holiday expenditures to \$100. "When we began we were long-faced, talking about the environmental damage that Christmas caused (all those batteries!), the money that could instead go to social justice work, and so on. But we found that this did not do the trick, either for us or for our fellow congregants. What did the trick, we discovered, was focusing on happier holidays.... We talked about making Christmas more fun."<sup>15</sup> By emphasizing families, friends, and fun, McKibben writes, people experienced a deeply joyful Christmas in spite of—or perhaps in part because of—the \$100 limit.

Fun is contagious, and showing people they could have more fun in a sustainable world may be a key to spreading the message of a new progress. As McKibben notes, "The only way to make people doubt, even for a minute, the inevitability of their course in life is to show them that they are being cheated of the truest happiness."<sup>16</sup> This is why the Center for a New American Dream, a U.S. organization that promotes a higher quality of life, uses the slogan "More fun, less stuff" in its work.<sup>17</sup>

### *Collaborate Whenever Possible*

The environmental and social issues involved in redefining progress are huge, and collaboration among religions and denominations is likely to increase the possibilities for successful engagement of them. Models of successful collaboration—especially across religions, not just within denominations—can maximize the effectiveness of reli-

gious partnerships. Organizations such as the National Religious Partnership on the Environment (NRPE), the European Christian Environmental Network, the World Council of Churches, and others stand as useful examples of how religions and denominations might work well together.

Another model for interreligious collaboration is the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP), a New York-based group that promotes religious cooperation on conflict resolution, human rights, child and family issues, peace education, disarmament, and development and environment.<sup>18</sup> Operating in 55 countries, WCRP uses a mechanism called Interreligious Councils (IRCs), composed of respected religious leaders of various faiths, to address tough issues in each nation. The IRCs bring together recognized and respected leaders of different groups who can speak credibly for their religion or denomination. By building trust among the leaders, these issue-driven interfaith groups are able to "bring the power of the collective voice to bear on pressing issues," according to WCRP Director of the Program on Children Jim Cairns. IRCs are "a durable mechanism for cooperation" that can be used to address issue after issue over time, he adds.

The IRCs have had some notable successes. Muslim and Christian leaders, for example, have worked to mediate two civil wars in Liberia, and to combat HIV/AIDS in Uganda. IRCs have also mediated among warring factions in Sierra Leone and helped ease ethnic tensions in Bosnia and Kosovo.<sup>19</sup> The potential of this kind of collaboration for building sustainable societies is clear. Imagine religious leaders getting together regularly to voice their support for renewable energy, opposition to oil drilling, or recommendation of adequate health care for all. Bringing together the moral power of religions to speak with one voice could be a powerful way for religious communities to help shape a new vision of progress.

### *Retreat to Your Own Corner*

As vital as collaboration is, the most important source of religious power is found in a tradition's own origins: in the charisma of its founder, the wisdom of its scriptures, and the stories that speak deeply to believers. A religion's most authentic response to today's

global crises is likely to emerge from its core inspiration. This is why interfaith organizations like ARC and NRPE do not create one-size-fits-all programs for their diverse members, but allow each to participate to the extent and in the way that is most authentic.

But religious people need to have confidence in the power and truth of their own sacred texts. Only to the extent that religious people take seriously their teachings—about the inherent dignity of all people, the need to treat others as we would be treated, and, increasingly, the need to care for the natural environment—will the power of those teachings be unleashed. Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister framed the issue well in an address to a conference of the Network of Spiritual Progressives in May 2006: “Do we need the culture to be religious?” she asked. “No, my friends, we need religions to be religious.”<sup>20</sup> Treated seriously, religious scrolls can release what theologian Daniel Maguire of the University of Notre Dame has called “theopolitical dynamite—a dynamic and powerful vision of what life can be,” and in the process, help change whole societies for the better.<sup>21</sup>

Unleashing this power, however, requires religious people to bring their values to the public square. Too often, especially in industrialized countries, values questions are treated as private matters that have no place in public discourse. But to leave one’s values at home is to assent to the status quo of excessive individualism, consumerism, commodification of myriad aspects of life, environmental decline, and the absence of strong communities. The religious community’s gift—to articulate the ethical and spiritual dimensions of modern issues—is indispensable to full public discussion of the pressing challenges of our day, and to developing a new understanding of human progress in the 21st century.

## Appendix

### Organizations Working on Sustainable Development Issues

#### INTERFAITH COLLABORATION

##### **Alliance of Religions and Conservation**

A nongovernmental organization that helps the major religions of the world develop their own environmental programs.

[www.arcworld.org](http://www.arcworld.org)

##### **Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions**

A group that promotes harmony among the world’s religions and seeks to engage them on major global issues through various fora and events.

[www.cpwr.org](http://www.cpwr.org)

##### **Forum on Religion and Ecology**

A resource-rich website with writings and activities related to sustainability from major world religions.

[www.environment.harvard.edu/religion/religion](http://www.environment.harvard.edu/religion/religion)

##### **Global Ethic Foundation**

An organization that promotes use of the Global Ethic worldwide.

[www.global-ethic.org](http://www.global-ethic.org)

##### **GreenFaith**

An interfaith organization that promotes green building, religious environmental education, and environmental advocacy.

[www.greenfaith.org](http://www.greenfaith.org)

##### **National Religious Partnership on the Environment**

A partnership of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, Evangelical Environmental Network, National Council of Churches, and U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to promote care of the environment.

[www.nrpe.org](http://www.nrpe.org)

**Interfaith Coalition on Energy**

An organization offering technical assistance on energy issues to houses of worship in the Philadelphia area.

[www.interfaithenergy.com](http://www.interfaithenergy.com)

**Interfaith Climate Change Network**

The site of the Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaigns of the National Council of Churches.

[www.protectingcreation.org](http://www.protectingcreation.org)

**Interfaith Power and Light (The Regeneration Project)**

An organization that helps houses of worship reduce energy use and advocate for greener energy and climate policies.

[www.theregenerationproject.org/ipl](http://www.theregenerationproject.org/ipl)

**What Would Jesus Drive? Campaign**

An educational campaign that reflects on the problems associated with transportation from a Christian perspective.

[www.whatwouldjesusdrive.org](http://www.whatwouldjesusdrive.org)

## Notes

### Introduction

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