**JAEI ENVIRONMENTAL CORNER**

# Celebrating a Season of Creation - LAND

***(***Taken from ***Season of Creation: Book 1)***

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| ***“… Each one of us is intimately attached to the soil of this beautiful country. Each time one of us touches the soil of this land, we feel a sense of personal renewal. We are moved by a sense of joy and exhilaration when the grass turns green and the flowers bloom. That spiritual and physical oneness we all share with this common homeland.” - Nelson Mandela***  ***“When the last tree has been felled, and when the last river has been seized, only then will we finally realize that we cannot eat money.” - Chief Seattle***  ***“I brought you into a fertile land to enjoy its fruits and every good thing in it. But when you entered my land you defiled it and made loathsome the home I gave you.” - (Jer 2:7)*** |

**Land – a gift for all or a commodity for few?**

Land is a theme which is interwoven in the history of God’s people. There are several key themes which emerge:

**Land as a promise and gift**

The Old Testament is a tapestry of stories in which land features as an alternating promise and gift. The first five books describe the covenant relationship that unites God, the people of Israel and the land. The Bible begins with the gift of land in the Garden of Eden and then other gifts and promises of habitable land, often to the landless: Goshen, ‘the best land’, to Joseph and his clan in Egypt; the land flowing with milk and honey to the Israelites; and a chance for the exiles in Babylon to return to their origins in Zion. But the gift of land does not come without conditions and responsibilities! The landless people of Israel receive a promise of security and belonging in a covenant with God, but they lose this conditional gift when they abuse the land, making it an object to be bought, sold and accumulated.

The land belongs to God, and the people are called to rule with justice and mercy. The legal codes and Wisdom literature appeal for the equitable distribution and redistribution of land and wealth. The Prophets warn against mismanagement, injustice and oppression but the land is exploited, polluted and defiled and the covenant with Yahweh is broken. As in the beginning of the Garden of Eden, people are punished for sin and banished. Samaria fell to the Assyrians, Jerusalem to the Babylonians, and the people are cast out of their land.

**The Earth is the Lord’s**

****While humans were given the often misinterpreted command to *“subdue and have dominion over”* the earth (Gen 1:28), we are also instructed to *“till and keep”* it. (Gen 2:15). The Earth is the Lord’s; it has been given as a conditional gift to human beings. Land is held in covenant with God and conditional God and conditional on right relations between God and people. No one may be deprived of their possession and use of land – not even by a king (see the account of Naboth’s vineyard 1 Kings 21). The Biblical story of the people of God makes plain that the promise of God was also a promise of land to the landless. Accordingly, the Bible expresses strong moral condemnation of greed and the abuses of the rich who force the poor and small farmers to give up their land*:* ”*Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field” - (Isaiah 5:8)*

*“They covet fields and seize them; and houses and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance”. - (Micah 2:2)*

There is thus no unconditional right to private property. Rights must be exercised to the benefit of others, to satisfy human needs and not human greet, and in ways that are not destructive of the land.

**Jubilee**

In the biblical notion of the Jubilee, we see God’s lordship in social, economic and ecological issues.

It is specified that during a Jubilee year:

* Land and houses must be returned to their original owners
* People can return freely to their families and properties
* Land must be allowed to rest.

Already implied in the idea that ‘the earth is the Lord’s’, Jubilee pronounces judgement on the accumulation of property and land since these deny a large part of humanity their just portion of the fruits of the earth. The basic underlying intention is clear: God destined the earth and all it contains for all people so that all created things would be shared fairly by all. Justice should go hand in hand with charity.

It is also significant that the Jubilee provisions include that the land too has ‘rights’ and must be left fallow in the Jubilee year. Not only does this contain an environmental component, but “during the period of recovery of the fruitfulness of cultivated land, its fruit is available to the poor and to the wild animals and birds.”

**Jesus’ announcement of the Good News of the Kingdom – Jubilee and Shalom**

Jesus is concerned with issues of land and rural justice. A Christian theology of land starts with an awareness of Christ’s reconciling power and must take into account the inter-relatedness of human beings and soil, water, plants and animal and rediscover a reverence for the earth as God’s creation.

In doing so, we do not only look back to creation or a past ‘golden age’. Christians look forward in hope and faith to the coming reign of God where the dominant vision is that of Shalom– a comprehensive Shalom of well-being, peace, justice and right relations.

So, as Christians, we are required to re-examine the ways in which we relate to the land and each other. Without sustaining life of earth, sustaining life on earth is made impossible. If reconciliation is about right relations, then in Christ we see people reconciled with people, with God and with creation.

**Land Use and Productivity**

Much of South Africa’s wealth has been built on rich mineral resources buried under the ground. The country itself is a dry land although the eastern and southern regions receive more rainfall than the Karoo and desert regions in the west. While 80% of the land is agricultural, only 11% is arable and used for growing crops. The rest is used for grazing.

There appear to be vast open tracts of countryside in SA but a variety of human activities have reduced agricultural potential and productivity and threatened many of the indigenous plants and animals which make up our world renowned and life sustaining biodiversity. Soil erosion, overgrazing and overstocking, burning, alien plant invasion, intensive high-tech agriculture and mining have been transformed by urban growth, the increase of golf courses and other recreational and development projects and the expansion of sugar cane and commercial timber plantations. In reality, nearly 20% of our land has been seriously degraded or lost to agriculture in some way.

The intensification of commercial agriculture is having severe long-term impacts on the environment. Pollution from mines and run off from the 2 million tons of chemical fertilizer and pesticides applied to our soils and crops each year poison our limited water resources and threaten biodiversity. Carbon dioxide (CO2) and methane from hi-tech commercial agriculture, mining and industry are major contributors to the greenhouse gases that are destabilising our atmosphere and fuelling climate change.

Although fires are part of the natural seasonal cycle of many of Africa’s ecosystems, burning too frequently in order to open up farmland and maintain grazing is gravely destructive. Apart from contributing to an increase in climate changing CO2, fires often encourage the expansion of deserts and the spread of alien invasive species. Desertification threatens more than half of SA’s land surface and the annual soil loss from erosion is over 400 million tons.

The earth sustains us, it is our only home. Although total food production in SA has increased over the last 40 years, the production per capita in southern Africa has dropped. While increasing productivity and developing food self-sufficiency is essential if we are to maintain the health and well-being of our growing human population, it is often at the expense of the environment and is not sustainable in the long term.

**Access to Land and Land Rights**

Dispossession and forced removal of people from their land during the apartheid era and in past centuries has left a legacy of inequality, and insecurity amongst a large proportion of SA’s population. Thirteen million people (28% of the population) were banished to former homelands (13% of the land) where land is communal and rights are still unclear. Severe overcrowding has had long-term socio-economic and environmental consequences. Workers on privately owned farms have also faced insecurity and inadequate basic services – an estimated 1 million people have been evicted from farms since 1994. Migration to overcrowded townships and informal settlements has resulted in gross overcrowding in urban centres where communities are dislocated and people face insecurity, poverty, ill-health, crime and lack of basic services.

Access to land is one of the region’s most socially and politically sensitive issues. Land also has a spiritual value which has no measure. Land invasions in Zimbabwe, the 2005 RSE Land Summit, removal of farm land for restitution purposes and the debate around foreign ownership have raised the profile of this issue. The process of land reform and climate change are two major emerging challenges which need urgent attention. Socioeconomic, political and ecological considerations will have to be addressed if long-term security and sustainability around land issues is to be achieved.

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| ***“As the soil leaves the countryside, so do the people”*** |

**Some Land Facts …**

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| **The population of South Africa has grown from 5.2 million in 1904 to 12 million in 1954 to 46.9 million in 2004. It is increasing by 1 million a year. Our land is under pressure…** |

**H**uman activities impact seriously on the productivity and sustainability of our land. This impacts on the cost of food prices. The legacy of Apartheid left us with vast areas of degraded land. There is a growing awareness that the cultural and spiritual value of this beautiful land we call ‘home’ is being threatened. We need to take responsibility for what is happening now and respond by practicing more sustainable land use.

• **Mining:** Mining companies are often more concerned about profits for share-holders than bearing the long term costs of damage to the environment. Sterile mine dumps are difficult and expensive rehabilitate. Acid and heavy metal contamination of soil and underground water is seriously impacting the land and the health of its inhabitants.

• **Agriculture**: excessive use of artificial fertilizers disturbs the natural balance in the soil. Pesticides destroy the pests that damage crops but they also wipe out living organisms that enrich soil. Deep ploughing and overgrazing damages soil structure and promotes erosion. Poisonous salts build up in the soil from excessive irrigation.

• **Fire, erosion and destruction of indigenous habitats**: Every year, fires destroy vast areas of natural habitat. They remove and endanger indigenous vegetation, expose topsoil to erosion from wind and rain and open land up to invasion by alien plants. Natural habitats can only survive fires at occur every 2 to 4 years (fynbos every 8 to 12 years) otherwise they suffer long term damage. A combination of overgrazing, burning, deforestation and soil erosion turns once fertile land into desert.

• **Development:** with a growing human population and rising affluent and aspirations for a better standard of living, people place increasing demands on the land. Only 13.5% of land in SA is suitable for growing crops. Use of farmland for the expansion of housing, informal settlements, roads, dams and industrial or recreational (e.g. golf course) development, is a growing threat to food security and our natural habitats.

• **Waste**: With our growing mountain of domestic and industrial waste, many municipal landfill sites are reaching their capacity. Scrap metal, plastic, builders’ rubble and discarded packaging pollute urban and rural land. Soaps, detergents, chemicals and other waste from our homes and factories poison the soil. Safe, long term disposal of radio-active and other hazardous wastes are another challenge.

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| ***“I am concerned about the wounds and bleeding sores on the naked body of the earth. Have we not seen the long-term effects of these bleeding sores? The famine? The poverty? We are responsible, directly or indirectly. We are strangling the earth.” Wangari Maathai (founder of Kenyan Green Belt Movement and 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner)*** |

**What we can do:**

* Avoid waste and litter polluting the soil: recycle and re-use as much as possible.
* Prevent soil erosion: place rocks and poles across steep paths. Try to leave as much plant cover as possible when building. Design paths to public areas to discourage people from destroying plant cover.
* Look at your church grounds: are they glorifying to God?
* Use water-wise and drought resistant plants and grasses for gardens and lawns.
* Plant indigenous trees in church grounds and other open spaces for special celebrations such as baptisms. Celebrate Arbor week in early September.
* Remove thirsty aliens like willows, gums, pines and poplars
* Protect natural habitats.
* Use natural fertilizers, compost & mulch. Avoid using pesticides, herbicides & poisons.
* Use environmentally friendly cleaning materials at church and at home.