

SAFCEI (Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute)

Bishop Geoff Davies*

Abstract

The Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI) grew out of a life-long conviction that the Christian church had failed in its responsibility to care for God's world. Surely we who worship the God who 'in the beginning created' all that exists, should take a lead in its care?

Introduction

In 1972, soon after ordination, I served at a mission station in the heart of the Kalahari in Botswana. I saw how death was prolific during droughts while life was abundant when the rains came; and how deeply this fragile balance was affected by our human behaviour. In the wilderness, north of the veterinary cordon, grass was abundant, but south of the fence the sand was grazed bare by cattle.

I was sufficiently concerned that care for creation seemed absent from the churches' agenda that I wrote to Archbishop Michael Ramsey, who responded with a wonderful letter assuring me that God indeed cares for all of his creation. We were certainly in the minority. On sabbatical leave I visited Christian Aid, where the Director laughed me out of court, saying that he could not go to the British public to express concern about wildlife in Africa, while there was one starving child. Since then there has been a dramatic change, of course, and now Christian Aid is giving a worthy lead in calling for climate justice.

SAFCEI

After retiring as the Bishop of the Diocese of Umzimvubu (Southern Africa) in 2004, I was able to convene a national conference to seek a mandate for a faith-based environment institute. With the endorsement of the South African Council of Churches, I had initially

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considered an ecumenical initiative. However our supporters at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) quietly suggested we include all South Africa's main faiths (although Christians comprise over 85% of the population we also have significant Bahai, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, African Traditional Religion, and Jewish communities). They responded with enthusiasm, and all of us remain immensely grateful for this proposal. We recognize that there are no 'Christian forests' or 'Muslim lakes' or 'Hindu rivers', but that we all alike share in our dependence on this planet. *The Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute*, SAFCEI, was founded on this basis.¹

We describe ourselves as multi-faith, rather than inter-faith. We are not trying to arrive at a synthesis of theology or a unified theological approach, but learn from each other, speaking on our own terms, respecting our differences, and celebrating the great deal we find in common. All faiths in their sacred writings express a deep appreciation of creation and concern for its care, and we encourage the production and disseminating of material tailored to each community which builds on these foundations according to that tradition. Each of us can therefore deepen our own engagement in environmental questions with integrity, through the perspectives of our own faith. In doing this we have also found that sharing our distinctive perspectives strengthens our common bonds and deepens our understanding of cherishing creation. I would go so far as to say that reflecting on this collaboration has deepened my Christian faith.

In pointing the way to the future, SAFCEI is bridging three divisions:

1. The first division is between our faiths. Our overriding challenge is to bring differing faith communities together to cherish living earth, learning to work with mutual respect as we strive to preserve our planet.

Our vision is *Faith communities committed to cherishing living earth.*

Our mission is *an Institute of people of many faiths, united in our diversity through our common commitment to earthkeeping. Our aim is to support the faith communities in fulfilling their environmental and socio-economic responsibility.*

So our overall calling is that as people of faith we care for God's creation.

2. The second division is between people of faith and environmentalists. For too long people of faith have appeared 'so heavenly minded, we were no earthly good.' SAFCEI has been warmly received by environmental organisations, who have said 'we hope at last people of

faith are recognizing the wonder and the importance of the natural environment and our dependence upon it, and our responsibility to care for it.'

3. The third division is between science and faith. At one time this seemed to be the most difficult one to bridge! Our opening conference almost collapsed over arguments around evolution, until I pointed out that humanity is rapidly destroying God's creation. However we believe the universe came into being, people of faith need to take on their responsibility so that our lifestyle becomes one of living in harmony with God's creation. Increasingly we see the need for our theology and our statements to be scientifically sound, understanding that we are integrally and intricately part of the rest of life. There is a great danger that we humans think we are separate from the rest of life, as if we are totally apart and can do what we wish with the rest of life. That attitude is a source of our undoing and hardly accords with God's mandate to us to 'keep the garden' (Gen. 2:15) and to appreciate that everything God had brought into being is 'very good'.

SAFCEI seeks to bridge these three divisions through applying the values and principles upheld by almost all faiths. Ethical principles must be applied in our dealings not only with one another but with the planet – the earth and all that is in it (Ps 24). Crucially, ethics must be applied to all of life – not just humans. We have to overcome our anthropocentric theology and acknowledge, in the words of Thomas Berry, that all of life is 'not a collection of objects, but a communion of subjects.' All life is valuable in the eyes of God.

Our current economic system seriously challenges the application of moral principles. The priority of economic growth is transcending all other values. It is well known that the three platforms of sustainable development are society, environment and economics, or in other parlance, people, planet and profit. Rio+20 acknowledged that economics or profit has dominated international climate change and environmental negotiations. When you look at the most influential structures in the world, such as the World Bank, and the support for international banking, one sees the dominance of economic interests. We have to apply ethics to our economic systems, which have tried to escape this, claiming that money must be free in order to make greater profit, whereas money needs to be seen as a tool or a resource to enable people to fulfil their social and developmental needs and to care for the natural environment.

There needs to be a radical interlocking of the three platforms of sustainable development and a radical paradigm shift, if we are to move ahead for a sustainable future.

What is needed is a Copernican revolution, in order to move us into this new paradigm and that is that we recognize that the well-being of the planet is at the centre –and not economic growth - and that we are totally dependent on this planet and its well-being. Economics is but a means of accomplishing our well-being. Let us move away from allowing economics to dominate over our social and environmental well-being.

If we then put the wellbeing of the planet at the centre, we will move ahead in meeting our energy needs through renewable energy and overcoming our addiction to and dependence on fossil fuels. Fossil fuels have brought immense wealth, but are now destroying the future of life on this planet. God has given us the answer by using today's energy in the form of wind or sun or ocean currents, instead of relying on energy laid down millions of years ago in the form of oil or coal or natural gas. Renewable energy is bringing about a whole new wave of employment and will rapidly restore the health of the planet, when we stop polluting the atmosphere.

SAFCEI and Hope

The key for our future hope is that we learn to live in harmony with nature and not against it. If we will learn not to pollute, poison and destroy life, we would be amazed at how rapidly nature will begin to heal itself and to be restored. We believe that people of faith must challenge the economic and secular forces, so that we learn to live and work with nature. When we do that there will be hope for the future and for our children.

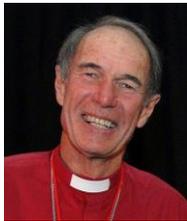
The multi-faith composition of SAFCEI has enabled us to develop the 'We Have Faith' (WHF) campaign. Supported and helped by Norwegian Church Aid, the WHF campaign was started to express the voice of faith in Africa to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) COP17 talks in Durban in 2011. SAFCEI was joined by the Economic Justice Network, the Indigenous People of Africa Coordinating Committee, the South African Council of Churches, and the Diakonia Council of Churches. We issued a clarion call at an opening rally, hosted by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to world leaders: 'You must be honest and committed to treating the Earth and people with respect.'

This has been a second indicator of hope, that people see religions cooperating and working together calling for a more sustainable, peaceful and just future. Justice and equity are foundational principles in all religions. Peace is the desired outcome of all religions. So often the world around us sees religions competing, disagreeing, and even resorting to violence. The religions of the world have far more in common with each other than

differences. The WHF campaign is an important initiative in strengthening the voice of faith communities. As people of faith we have something very important to say to the world, based on our sacred writings and traditions, which for many of us go back thousands of years. If the world hears us and applies the values and principles that people of faith uphold, we can turn the present direction of the world to one that will provide a sustainable future. If we continue to go it alone and compete with each other, we will be turning back to the law of the jungle.

Apply the principles upheld by all faiths of justice, equity, compassion and love and we will find a peaceful future. Apply these to all of life and we have grounds for hope. Let us, as people of faith, care for and act now for the well-being of people and all life on this planet.

Biography



Bishop Geoff Davies was the inaugural Bishop of Umzimvubu in South Africa. After retiring from the Diocese in 2003, he initiated the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI) and is now Executive Director.

Reference

¹ The Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI) (2012). Retrieved December 30, 2012, from <http://www.safcei.org>