

Touch the Earth Lightly
Keynote Presentation, Connecticut Conference UCC
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Last October, at your fall meeting, the Rev. Dr. Crabtree did a wonderful job of calling the churches of this Conference to act on our world's environmental crisis, especially the crisis of climate change. I'm honored to be here with you this spring to follow up on that theme.

I'll be talking this morning about "Touching the Earth Lightly" as an ethical and spiritual necessity, and naming several choices that churches must make about how they will act on this issue. Several of the workshops today will provide opportunities to go deeper on that theme.

Both from my vocation at Eco-Justice Ministries, and as a volunteer member of the UCC's Environment and Energy Task Force, I am delighted and energized by seeing how the churches of this Conference are addressing what ethicist Larry Rasmussen calls "the Earth's distress." You are part of a religious environmental movement that has deep roots, and that is also growing quickly in size and passion.

I thank you for this opportunity to be here with you, and to delve into our responsibilities to care for God's creation.

General Synod

But the environment wasn't the only thing that Davida talked about in October. She started off with a reminder about a couple of important dates. She said, last fall, that it was only 244 days until General Synod convenes in Hartford. Well, now it is spring, and the count has worked its way down to 40.

In biblical usage, "40" means "a long time." But for some of you here in Connecticut, I imagine that 40 days is sounding like a very short period of time.

You have my deep appreciation for your work. Back in 1985, when the General Synod was held in Iowa, I chaired one of the committees of the hosting team. When I was recruited to chair that committee, the Conference moderator told me that hosting a Synod would be a "once in a lifetime" experience, and he was right. *Nobody in their right mind would do it twice!*

But doing it once is a profound experience. I hope those of you who are helping with this summer's Synod agree that this is a wonderful opportunity to get to know our denomination, and to participate in the work of the church.

50 years of change

There is another date that Davida mentioned last fall which is very much on our minds this weekend. You are marking two significant anniversaries from 1957. We are here at Silver Lake because this is the camp's 50th birthday. This summer's Synod is an especially demanding task for y'all because it is the huge 50th anniversary celebration of our denomination. In Hartford, we'll "Let it shine!" as an affirmation of our history and heritage.

Fifty years ago isn't all that far back, in the grand scheme of things. But when we look at life in 1957, it seems like a very different world.

That contrast is, in itself, rather remarkable. For most of human history, generation after generation would have a good expectation that the patterns and structures of life would be fairly consistent. People would live in the same town, and maybe the same house, as their grandparents. The cycles of life rolled by with consistent annual patterns. Tools and fashions and social structures didn't change much, if at all.

An occasional event like a flood or a war might bring tumult and sudden transformation, but for thousands of years, the normal human experience has been one of continuity. Within the last few hundred years, though, that expectation has been turned around. Change -- profound change -- is now the norm for most of us. Looking back 50 years to 1957 makes the pace of that change vividly real.

I was 5 years old in 1957, so there are only a few things that I sort of remember from personal experience. But that end-of-the-50s time is the world that I grew up in, and there are parts of it that seem both strangely familiar and jarringly different.

In 1957, Eisenhower was president, and it would still be a few years until he issued a warning about the growing power of what he called "the military-industrial complex." The cold war was chilly, but not really cold yet. The Korean War had ended just a few years before; Vietnam was that country where the French were bogged down in a quagmire. The European powers were just starting to let go of their African colonies, and Cuba wasn't run by a person named Castro.

The first H-bomb was tested in April of 1957, and Sputnik would be the first object to orbit the Earth in the fall of '57.

Trends were being set into motion that will take us to where we are now, but nobody then could have imagined how they would play out.

Looking back, we can see that the military-industrial complex is bigger and more powerful than ever, and pieces of it have transformed into a complex set of multi-national corporations which transcend the control of national governments. The cold war ended, and we now live in the time of US empire.

Less than 12 years after Sputnik, US astronauts landed on the moon -- and we only went back five other times. But we haven't left space. Satellites handle much of our communication, provide pinpoint navigation, and are the foundation for weather research. Paying tourists can spend a week on the international space station, and they get there in Russian rockets.

In 1957, a computer which could do almost nothing filled an entire building. In 1969, the engineers who sent people to the moon did most of their calculations on slide rules. Now, we have computers everywhere, doing everything. Personal computers are ubiquitous, and we carry them along with us. Fifty years ago, no one could have imagined the Internet and the sort of information that we have available -- or how dependent we would be on email and Google. Ways of working that we take for granted now -- word processing and spreadsheets -- simply didn't exist.

Nor could they have imagined cell phones and all the other ways that we're always in touch with each other. Or the amazing transformations in medicine, with transplants and miracle drugs, and with profound changes in health insurance, and the creation of Medicare.

Obviously, nobody sits down and creates a detailed blueprint of how the world will work 20 or 50 or 100 years in advance. But dreams and commitments, goals and values, do play a part in shaping how things will come to be. Folk from 1957 would not recognize how we live, but what happened then has shaped who we are now.

Remember that, because the same thing applies to us. We can't spell out the details of the technologies that will be common for our grandchildren. We can't say with certainty how to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 80% within 40 years. But the choices that we make now, and the institutions that we empower, will shape the course of our society. Without knowing all the details, it is still our task to define the direction that our world will go for the next 50 years.

Social changes & UCC

The technical changes of the last half-century have been amazing. But they are not half as remarkable as some of the social and cultural changes.

Most of what we refer to as the Civil Rights Movement has happened since 1957. Brown vs. Board of Education was in 1954, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott ended in December of 1956. Things were starting to change with race in America. But the sit-ins and the mass marches, the voting rights act and the civil rights act came later, and so did the race riots of the late 60s. Racism certainly has not disappeared, but racial segregation and blatant discrimination aren't legal and pervasive as they once were.

So, too, the women's movement brought remarkable changes in employment, legal rights, family structures, health care and language. An ad in Time Magazine in June of '57 showed rows of desk size "accounting machines" in an office. The white man who was the obvious corporate boss is saying, "With these new machines, the girls can get their reports out on time!" We could spend the rest of the morning just unpacking that one ad!

In 1957, if you were not heterosexual, you probably kept very quiet, or you lived a lie. Who could have imagined gay marriage would be legal in Massachusetts -- or in South Africa!

The social and cultural changes that have happened in 50 years are astonishing. Someone from 50 years ago might be dazzled and delighted by computers and heart transplants, but they might find it almost impossible to comprehend a world where Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are leading presidential candidates, and Condoleeza Rice is the Secretary of State.

Our United Church of Christ has been at the forefront of many of those changes. We have been diligent in our work for racial justice, and for women's rights. Our Open & Affirming stance of inclusivity for gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender people has been transformational far beyond our church structures.

We in the UCC have been leaders in the ongoing work for peace and justice around the world. When the UCC was formed, I doubt if many knew precisely how our church would stand out as

a prophetic moral leader. Those founding folk could not have imagined many of the issues that our denomination has faced. But the faith and values of those early years have shaped our consistent witness. Our commitment to engagement with the world has shaped our witness through the years.

Change happens. A look at the last 50 years makes that abundantly clear. We have seen profound transformations in technology, social values, economic systems and geopolitical alignments. Those changes have not been accidental. They have been formed by strategic movements, and by clear values. If anybody dares to suggest that we can't face today's great environmental challenges because they call for changes that will be too big or too hard, remember the incredible changes of the last 50 years.

Environmental challenges

Ah, but those environmental challenges do exist. Because not all of the changes of the last 50 years have been good for the Earth. The goals and values and powerful institutional forces that were in place in 1957 have helped to create the environmental mess that we're in now. (See we finally made it back to the theme!)

Let's start with one of the most shocking changes. Within my lifetime, the human population of the world has almost tripled. It took hundreds of thousands of years for the global population to get to 500 million, making it to that level about the time that Columbus stumbled onto the Americas. It took a little under 300 years to double to 1 billion, and it hit 2 billion around the end of World War II. We're now at something like 6.4 billion people.

Not only are there three times as many of us as when I was born, but we have powerful new technologies that amplify our impacts, and our expectations for standard of living and consumption keep rising.

As I was paging through old Time Magazines from 1957, I found a little article about oil use. The then "current" world oil production of 15 million barrels per day was predicted to double by 1965 -- and that doubling in just 8 years was seen as good news. I checked, and by 2003, world oil production had expanded to 80 million barrels per day -- globally, our use of oil is now almost six times what it was in '57. The population has tripled, and our use of oil has gone up six times.

In the 50s the average new home had 983 square feet of living space; today's homes have 2,349 - almost two and a half times the size per house, and with fewer people living in them. Urban sprawl often puts those big new houses on what had been productive farmland, or they disrupt essential wildlife habitat.

Since 1957, highway travel in the US has about doubled, but passenger miles by air have increased by 15 times. Air travel is the most environmentally damaging way of moving people.

In the 1950s almost all farms were small family farms, using seeds that they had saved from the previous year, and using very little artificial fertilizer, herbicides or pesticides. Today's corporate farms use genetically modified seeds that can't be carried over, and which depend on massive amounts of chemical inputs that destroy the diversity of plant and animal life, and poison our soil air and water. Industrial farming has created "animal production facilities" where chickens never

leave tiny cages, and where hogs produce more sewage at a single operation than some small cities.

This rapidly growing human impact around the world -- urban sprawl, the denuding of the Amazon, and the depletion of the oceans -- has put us in the midst of a great extinction event, wiping out species at a rate and a scale not seen since the end of the dinosaurs.

Our enormous use of fossil fuels -- gasoline for cars and trucks, jet fuel for planes, natural gas for heating and industry, and coal for much of our electrical power -- is the driving force behind global climate change. A worldwide catastrophe is underway, and -- as usual -- the greatest impacts are falling on the poor, and on those who have done the least to create the crisis.

Almost no one in 1957 could have imagined humanity having that sort of impact on the world. Indeed, there are many today who still can't get their heads around it. But the choices about cities and cars, about the use of cheap and abundant energy, about what technologies to encourage or hinder -- all those choices going back 50 years and more have shaped the problems we face today.

Summary on change

I've spent lots of time this morning talking about change. Let me be clear about why.

1) Change happens, and it is happening at an accelerating rate. Things do not stand still anymore. Just leaving things as they are is not an option.

2) Change is not random. While we might not be able to look into a crystal ball and describe the future, there are visions and values, plans and purposes, structures and systems that shape which way things are likely to go. As we've seen with our UCC heritage, strong and clear leaders can shape history and societies. We are not powerless.

3) But not all change is for the good. We have created a mess -- a very dangerous mess -- as humanity's impact on the world has expanded dramatically, especially within the last hundred years or so. And the trajectory we're on now, driven by powerful values and institutions, will take us into an even more dangerous and unstable future. Business as usual is a path to disaster.

Changing situation

Theologian Daniel Maguire has said it well, "For the first time, humanity's power to destroy has outstripped the earth's power to restore." For the first time.

We are in a situation that those who came before have never encountered -- the overloading of entire planetary systems. Our local and global impacts are far beyond what people knew, or could have imagined, 50 years ago.

But that is where we are, and things are getting worse.

We have reached a point where the very rules have changed. Because our power to destroy has outstripped the earth's power to restore, we can no longer assume that our abuse and exploitation

of the earth is a viable option. We can no longer assume that we'll be able to find other resources, or move to some other place.

In this new situation, we *must* touch the earth lightly. We must live within the limits of resources and systems. We must recognize that we are part of a fragile and interdependent web of life.

Those changes go to the very core of our self-identity. They represent shifts in our understanding of humanity's place and purpose in creation, of our relationship with God, and with all of our neighbors. These are profoundly moral, ethical and spiritual changes. They cause us to rethink who we are as human beings, and to reconsider the meaning of sin and evil and salvation.

In this new world, an old ethical guideline takes on a new form. "Love your neighbor" has always been a core principle of our faith. Those of us who have been committed to justice know that love for our neighbor goes beyond charity and compassion, and calls us to give voice to the voiceless, and power to the marginalized. But now we need to expand our sense of neighbor in three important ways.

1) Our community really is global, not just local.

We've always cared about those other folk around the world. But recent years have brought a big change -- those are not people "over there" who are rather removed from us. We are deeply and intimately connected.

In our globalized economy, our choices and actions have far reaching consequences. Our food comes from Florida and California, Central America and Chile, and New Zealand. Going clothes shopping provides a lesson in global geography and economics, as the tags provide a list of the countries around the world paying the lowest wages.

We're all in this together. Caring about people on the other side of the world is not a matter of compassion for those who are isolated from us. It is a matter of very direct relationships with people and communities all around the world.

This global awareness does more than increase our compassion and commitment to help others. It makes us look honestly and confessionally at our own lives and lifestyles. We are not the enlightened, caring helpers who can bring better living to the less fortunate. We are embedded in the problems.

Our ethics are reshaped when we expand the circles of awareness from what is local to what is global. We may have been inclined to give voice to the voiceless in our own communities. But now we find ourselves in direct relationship with those around the world with little power to voice their needs.

Who are the voiceless? Indigenous people in Brazil, whose rainforest home is destroyed for cattle and gold. Underpaid and overworked in China who make our standard of living possible. Fishers in Nigeria whose fishing grounds have been ruined by oil.

That's not hard to conceptualize, even though it may be hard to take into our hearts and souls. The next expansion of circles is more of a challenge.

2) Future generations -- no voice at all!

As we've noted, we live in a time of remarkable change. We have no expectation that the world in 50 or 100 years will have much resemblance to what we know now.

It used to be that caring for your own community brought with it some sense of caring for the future of that community. We can't assume that anymore.

So the next expansion of our ethical circles is to consider the needs of future generations. They are truly voiceless, because they don't exist yet. They can't stand in front of us to speak about their rights, their interests, their needs and their values.

What sort of a world will those people of the future inherit from us? There are lots of uncertainties, but also some things that we can say with certainty.

The world will be more crowded, adding another 3 billion people in the next 50 years. That, in itself, is an enormous demand on this planet. Not only are our numbers soaring, but the way we live is changing. Globally, we are right at a point where more than half the people live in urban areas. That's a dramatic shift from rural lifestyles, from settings that can be fairly self-sufficient and into cities that depend on complex systems.

The world will be hotter. Global warming is happening, and it cannot be reversed in the near term. The best we can do is minimize the changes. As the planet heats, there will be millions of climate refugees -- some are saying that the refugee crisis in Darfur is the first of those climate migrations. Diseases will spread, and insects will have different impacts on crops and forests.

The world of the future -- the near future -- will be filled with people, but diminished in the rest of the life that it sustains. Thousands of species are being pushed into extinction, lost forever because there's simply no room left for them. Over fishing is denuding the oceans of life, and leading to the collapse of fish populations. Global warming is destroying coral reefs and mangrove swamps, which together are the great breeding grounds for ocean life. Industrial, corporate agriculture is reducing the variety of species and varieties raised for food, so that we see vast monocultures without diversity.

The world of the future will be one of exhausted resources. Within a very few years, the worldwide demand for oil will exceed what the world's oilfields can produce. Oil shortages and astronomical prices will be normal. Within a few years after that, the total production of oil will peak, and then begin to decline. We won't really run out of oil for a very long time, but "peak oil" means that our entire petroleum-based civilization will be hard-hit, and profoundly transformed. We'll also see shortages of fresh water, of productive topsoil, of essential minerals like copper.

Today's humans -- with our unprecedented numbers, powerful technologies, and insatiable appetites -- are transforming the functioning of this entire planet. We are distorting and shredding the web of life.

This is a new ethical problem for us. Never before have we needed to imagine such a profoundly changed world for our descendants. Never before have we been called to give voice to the future in such significant ways.

When I've met with church groups to talk about global warming, I used to ask, "What sort of world do you want to leave to your children and grandchildren?" I'm realizing, though, that that's not an adequate question. It is much better to ask, "What sort of a world do our descendants have a right to expect from us?"

Asking what *we* want to leave to *them* depends on our charity. Asking what they have a right to expect begins to give some sort of voice, some self-expression, to those who will follow us.

It is a stretch for many of us to think that people who will live 50, or 100, or 500 years from now are part of our community. It is hard to think that they have moral claims on us. But it is ethically irresponsible to ignore the voiceless multitudes of the future. We are bound to them by the choices we make today.

But the third expansion of our ethical circles is much more challenging for some.

3) All of creation

Our moral concern is not only for people around the world, and for people extending into the future. Our ethics and our morality must extend to include all of God's creation.

We need to see the fish and the forests as full and active members of the earth community. They are not just resources, things that can be used or abused or exploited for our convenience. They are subjects with moral standing, members of God's creation who have inherent worth.

I've already mentioned many of these issues from the human side -- the extinction of species and the loss of biological diversity, the decimating of ocean life, and the destruction of coral reefs. Indeed, for purely practical reasons, these are dangers to us. But our ethics need to go beyond the pragmatic.

Our language has led us into problems, by allowing us to speak of "people" and "nature" as mutually exclusive realms. We've thought that we are separate from the natural world, and that different rules apply.

The great new insight of ecological studies, though, is that we are all part of the web of life. No one stands outside of it or separate from it. We are all part of one whole, one creation, and the same rules apply to us all.

We live in a time of rapid and dramatic change. The layers of change that have occurred within the last 50 years have pushed humanity, and the entire planet, into a totally new situation. The old rules simply won't work anymore. We need to expand our circles of concern, or ethical awareness, and we need to rethink who we are in relationship to our neighbors and to God.

We need to reclaim the great wisdom of the biblical concept of *shalom*, of God's peace with justice which reaches out to include all of creation. We need to affirm the perspectives of the newer principle of eco-justice, which seeks "the well-being of all humanity on a thriving earth."

Business as usual

When I'm leading workshops at local churches, I often do an exercise with the participants. I get out the newsprint -- I am a UCC minister, after all! -- and I ask them to brainstorm all of the environmental problems that they know about and worry about. They usually start with global warming, air and water pollution, and then start to get more detailed. When we've filled up the entire sheet, I tell them that the point of the exercise is not to depress them, but to make a larger point.

The fact that there are so many problems, that they are so severe and so interconnected, shows us that there's something wrong at the core. It isn't that we have technical problems doing water treatment, and generating electricity, and planning transportation, and growing food. We're just living out of whack with the world, and it is showing up in a lot of ways.

Global warming is the most dramatic, immediate and urgent indicator of how we've gotten ourselves into a distorted relationship. It isn't the only problem, but it is one that affects all of us. Let me focus my comments for a while specifically on the climate issues -- but because these are all expressions of the same distorted relationships, it isn't just about global warming.

There's a fairly technical term in the field of climate studies which refers to "business as usual" or BAU. BAU looks to economic, technological and scientific models to project how much new carbon dioxide is likely to go into the atmosphere if we don't implement new policies.

The experts in such things have generated business as usual predictions for humanity as a whole, and for the US in particular. The US projections are very important in shaping public policy decisions for our own country.

Business as usual says that, every year, the US will emit an increasing amount of carbon dioxide. In 1990, our country put out 6 billion tons of the stuff. We're now putting out a little over 7 billion tons. By 2020, business as usual projections have the US emitting up to 10 billion tons of CO₂.

Because CO₂ hangs around in the atmosphere, every year's new emissions push the total level of greenhouse gasses that are in the atmosphere substantially higher. And the higher those levels go, the more extreme are the projected impacts of climate change.

If you've seen *An Inconvenient Truth*, business as usual is that scene when Al Gore gets on the mechanical lift, and rides up along the nearly vertical red line of CO₂ levels.

Business as usual is the path to disaster. Business as usual makes the problem worse every year. And it describes what will happen unless we take some specific actions to turn our society in a different direction.

We must make choices

We face a very basic choice. We can -- we must -- decide if we're going to let things go on their current track of business as usual, or if we're going to do something very different.

We can decide if we're going to continue on the path of accelerated warming, or if we're going to take strong steps toward "touching the earth lightly."

We can decide if we're going to focus on ourselves, or if we're going to live out of an expansive sense of our neighbor -- one that calls us into a global community, a relationship with future generations, and which recognizes our ties with the whole web of life.

Because we're in such an extreme situation already, the choice really is between (a) business as usual, and (b) doing something very dramatic. Doing a little bit is basically the same as going on as usual. As tundra thaws, and glaciers recede, and polar ice melts, we are on the brink of a "tipping point" where human-induced changes to the earth's climate shift in ways that are simply not manageable. They lead to the catastrophic loss of species, extreme sea level rises, climate instability and social chaos.

It is like we're rushing toward a cliff of uncontrollable change. Halfway measures mean that we go off the cliff walking, instead of running, and that isn't much of a distinction once you're over the edge.

Our choice is between going on with business as usual, and making a significant change that might keep us from going over the edge of the cliff. If you were part of the Step It Up rallies a month ago, or if you are watching the legislation that is being proposed in Congress, those big changes involve reducing US emissions of carbon dioxide 80% by 2050. That is a big change, and it is the level of change that we need to move toward stability.

That decision between business as usual and dramatic change is a real choice, and some people are deciding to go in a direction that I find hard to believe.

Listen to part of a recent article by George Reisman, from the Free Market News Network:

If one values the benefits provided by industrial civilization above the avoidance of the losses alleged to result from global warming, it follows that nothing should be done to stop global warming that destroys or undermines industrial civilization. That is, it follows that global warming should simply be accepted as a byproduct of economic progress and that life should go on as normal in the face of it.

Modern, industrial civilization and its further development are values that we dare not sacrifice if we value our material well-being, our health, and our very lives. It is what has enabled billions more people to survive and to live longer and better. Here in the United States it has enabled the average person to live at a level far surpassing that of kings and emperors of a few generations ago.

The foundation of this civilization has been, and for the foreseeable future will continue to be, the use of fossil fuels.

If the economic progress of the last two hundred years or more is to continue, if its existing benefits are to be maintained and enlarged, the people of the United States, and hopefully of the rest of the world as well, must turn their backs on environmentalism.

That emphasis on "our" well-being is a striking contrast with the ethic that I outlined which calls us to expand our circles of concern.

This is a hard choice, even if it is clear-cut. If it were easy -- technically, politically, morally or psychologically -- we'd have solved it by now.

What can churches do?

What we do as churches depends on what we've decided between business as usual and dramatic change. I'm going to outline four possible responses from churches. You can decide where your church fits now, and where you think it should be.

1. silence

If your congregation, like Mr. Reisman, thinks that business as usual is the way to go, you've got it easy. You don't have to do anything -- just coast along with the current ways of our society.

You don't have to announce that you are willing to participate in catastrophic climate change. In fact, you never need to talk about climate change or the environment at all. You can be absolutely silent about environmental issues, because if you don't even bother to mention them, it is obvious that you don't consider them important enough to worry about.

If your church is OK with business as usual, if you're willing to see that graph of atmospheric carbon dioxide shoot straight up, then don't do anything at all. Never preach a sermon on the environment. Don't sing hymns that might make people think about their responsibilities. Never stretch the prayers out beyond the immediate pastoral concerns of the congregation. Don't ever have a class about our relationship with God's creation, or about the spiritual flaws of consumer society.

We've spent quite a bit of time this morning looking at how rapidly our society is changing, and we've noticed that the direction of those changes is shaped by assumptions about what is good and right. If the assumptions that have brought us into this time of crisis are not challenged, then we will continue with business as usual.

Silence is a very loud message that the current trends are just fine.

Last October, Dr. Crabtree called the churches of this Conference out of silence. I hear that at least half of the congregations in Connecticut have formed "green teams," and are developing programs to respond to her challenge. That's good.

But if your church is in the half that hasn't done anything yet, I urge you to think very carefully about the implications of your silence.

2. beginning steps

Many congregations have taken the significant step of going from silence and business as usual, to doing something intentional. In many churches, taking that step is a real shift in perspective, and it carries with it substantial conflicts and difficulties.

I do want to affirm the importance of doing something -- anything -- over not doing anything at all. But I also want to push hard.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Matthew 5:46-47)

In many churches across the country, the accomplishments in "greening the church" get local congregations up to the point of doing somewhat less than other businesses and groups. Let's hold up that challenge from Jesus: "what more are you doing than others?"

Before we start boasting about being environmentally aware, let's see if we have even made it to the normal business practices of our neighbors. What are the basics these days?

Turn off the computers and copiers whenever they're not in use, and certainly at night. Tune up the furnace, install programmable thermostats, and set the temperatures a bit on the cool side in the winter.

If you're buying new appliances -- computers, or refrigerators -- then get the "Energy Star" certified models. If you were buying them under a government contract, you'd be *required* to. Doing anything less is foolish and irresponsible.

Recycle things, and buy recycled. If the high school recycles cans and bottles, then your church certainly can. If Kinko's can use recycled paper all the time, so can your church.

Change those light bulbs. If the Department of Defense can use compact florescent light bulbs, so can your church. And whatever kind of lights you have, for God's sake, turn them off when there's nobody around!

Use email where you can, instead of printing gazillions of newsletters.

All of those are now standard business practices. They're not radical or flaky or left wing. They're not even terribly "environmental." Most of them are basic ways of saving money. Your church isn't doing a good job with its stewardship of finances if you're wasting money on careless or inefficient practices.

It is a travesty if even our "green" churches have some of the worst environmental records in the community. It is absurd if we claim to be "green" for doing half of what the local grade school does.

Yes, I do celebrate the significant step from (a) willfully doing nothing at all, to (b) doing something. I know that making those first steps can be hard. But keep it in perspective -- getting to the point where we're matching area businesses and schools is just common sense, not a matter of pride.

3. leadership

I hope that your congregation is doing what it can to move toward a position of real leadership -- that you are looking for ways to be out in front of your community as an expression of your faith and ethics, and that you're providing an example and a witness that is influential to others.

I know of some churches that are installing solar panels on their roofs or grounds to generate electricity. They will meet most of their own electrical needs, and maybe even provide some power back into the grid. For most of them, this isn't a great financial investment -- the payback point is years and years into the future. But it is an act of faith and hope which speaks loudly to the community about a commitment to wean ourselves from fossil fuels. On a less dramatic scale, many churches are buying wind power for some or all of their electrical needs as an act of witness and leadership.

The Church of England -- the whole Anglican communion in England, Scotland and Wales -- has made a commitment to reduce their carbon emissions to 40% of current levels by 2050. And remember -- that's for a church body that has church buildings that are 500 years old!
(<http://www.shrinkingthefootprint.cofe.anglican.org/>)

The Silver Lake center is providing real leadership with its many new environmental efforts -- composting toilets, gray water systems, solar water heating for showers -- and by doing the educational work to explain why those changes are being made.

Churches provide leadership when they engage their members, and their neighborhoods, in discussions of current issues -- like when 4,000 congregations across the US showed *An Inconvenient Truth* last October, and then held discussions about the moral and ethical implications of the message.

Churches provide leadership when they enter into political advocacy, and take a public stand in support of renewable energy standards, or call on Congress to act with very strong legislation on climate change, or auto fuel efficiency standards.

Churches provide leadership when they encourage the use of fair trade coffee, and when they sell canvas shopping bags, and -- yes -- even when they establish a policy against disposable coffee cups.

Churches provide leadership when ecologically responsible principles turn up in the worship services more than once or twice a year, and when members of the congregation know that "we care about those things in our church!"

A leadership church does things that other groups are not doing. It goes the extra mile to stand up for its values, and it lets the word out about why it is doing those things.

I hope that *every* church in the Connecticut Conference can, within the next year, honestly claim to be providing leadership on some point of witness of caring for God's creation. You can boast about that!

4. transformation

I've said that global warming is a symptom of a far larger problem. The whole range of environmental issues that we face are indicators that we're living in an unhealthy, distorted relationship with our fellow creatures, and probably with God, too.

What we most urgently need are churches who see their ministries as being transformational of individuals, communities and society. We need churches that will not only act contrary to "business as usual", but who will challenge the very assumptions and structures of "usual."

We need churches that go beyond recycling programs, and critique the foundations of consumer culture. Guiding people into the joys and blessings of voluntary simplicity is a transformational act.

We need churches that call us out of individualism and self-interest, and that entice us into a deep sense of our relationship with all of God's creation.

We need churches that speak truth to power, and are willing to name the ways in which the trends of economic globalization reduce persons and all of the rest of creation to commodities that can be traded and sold, and which embody no commitment to justice now, or into the future.

We need churches that lift up new, faithful, Christian visions of the good life. We need churches that redefine "progress" so that isn't about accumulating more stuff, but about moving toward God's *shalom*.

Conclusion

In our churches, we are called to make many decisions.

We must make a choice, and intentional choice, whether we're going to go along with business as usual, or whether we're going to become engaged on some level, and in some way, with restoring the earth.

Assuming -- and I hope I can assume this -- assuming that we find business with usual to be morally and practically unacceptable, we have to choose how strongly our faith calls us into new ways of living, thinking, believing and being.

We certainly must get to the point where we're doing the basic, reputable, accepted things that any responsible business or family tries to do.

Every church should be able to go beyond those base-line behaviors, and find some way to provide leadership, education and guidance.

And some churches will discern their calling to be transformational rabble-rousers, who hold the rest of us accountable, and who call the rest of us into more significant commitments.

Those are our choices. They are choices, on some level, that churches have always had to make, about how much to be part of, or apart from, the dominant culture. But these choices about how we live in relationship with the whole of creation, now and into the future, have a fresh urgency because of the catastrophic state of the earth.

We cannot put off these decisions. We cannot pretend that they are unimportant, or that somebody else will do it. These are essential, urgent questions of faith for our time.

I give thanks for the growing commitment of the UCC and the Connecticut Conference to address these issues in faith and in action.

May we be open to God's gracious guidance as we work to change the course of our society.

Amen!