

Our Most Important Task?

How Economics and Ecology Are Intertwined

By Michael Schut

We all have our passions. Thank God for that. The embers of social change smolder, kindled by such passion. Periodically the embers explode, spreading like wildfire, fueled by that same passion.

What is our passion, our most important task? How would *you* answer that question?

Bringing economics home

I would say that task is to once again nestle our economic system within Earth's cycles, Earth's economy, recognizing that everything we have, everything that feeds our economy, comes from God's creation. In a way "nestle" is too gentle a word -- wrestle comes to mind.

Now, at the first mention of "economy" or "economics," some of us freeze as if caught in the headlights of an oncoming truck. Economics, at its most basic, simply concerns itself with who gets what and how we manage and share the gifts of Earth.

As it is, our economy sees itself as separate from, rather than fully dependent upon, Earth's generosity. Though our Earth-home is resilient, fertile and productive beyond our imaginings, it is also finite, cannot survive, and will not truck, any economy's infinite expansion.

As the Most Rev. Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, said in his 2005 "Ecology and Economy" speech:

"...this separation or opposition [between economics and ecology] has come to look like a massive mistake. It has been said that 'the economy is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the environment.' The earth itself is what ultimately controls economic activity."

No surprise, really

We should not be surprised at the intimate connections between economics and ecology. Both share the same Greek root word of *oikos*. An *oikos* is a dwelling place, a home. Ecology is the science, the "logic," of a household -- the way the house operates and is held together. Economy can be understood as active housekeeping, or, as the archbishop said, the "law that regulates behavior in an environment."



If we as a society do not recognize and embody the fact that 'the economy is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the environment' we can only expect to stay on our current trajectory:

- increased inequity
- environmental degradation impacting minorities and the poor, particularly their health
- increased loss of species
- climate change, which exacerbates all of the above

What can we do?

The Episcopal Church recently created a new position: economic and environmental affairs officer. In so doing they recognized the intimate connections between economics and ecology -- which is itself a rather prophetic stance.

But creating a position is relatively insignificant. The scale of the changes needed call all of us to work toward a cultural shift that embeds our economy within Earth's systems.

I would suggest that the place to start is to *do* nothing. Marinate in the truth that your identity is rooted in being a child of God. Consciously resist the fiction our society proclaims: you are merely a consumer, your identity and worth defined by what you do and have.

Second, reclaim our faith's contention that God's creation is sacred, very good. Recall that Paul, in his speech to the Athenians in Acts 17, states that it is in God that we "live and move and have our being" as if we are swimming in God's presence.

The necessity of these first two steps ought to stamp into our very being the necessity of the Church taking a leadership role in what I have called our most important task. The changes required of us are technical, scientific and economic -- but they are fundamentally informed by deep changes in the way we see ourselves and the way we see God's creation.

Let us live in grace. We are children of God and the places we call home, and the Earth-home we all share, are "very good."

Michael Schut serves as the Economic and Environmental Affairs Officer of the Episcopal Church, based in Seattle, following 11 years on the staff of Earth Ministry. mschut@episcopalchurch.org

Resources and Ideas

- Take advantage of your church's local and/or national resources. See the connections: for example, take anti-racism training for your own growth and out of the recognition that minority communities bear the brunt of environmental degradation.

- Create a "Green Team" in your church. Look for Environmental Stewardship resources on the Peace and Justice Ministry page on the Church Center's website: http://www.episcopalchurch.org/peace_justice. There you will find links to the Episcopal Ecological Network and Green Faith.
- Use the Episcopal Network for Economic Justice resources, found at enej.org/resources.htm.
- Focus on changing daily habits in the areas of transportation, food choices and how you care for your home, the three areas in which individuals have the greatest environmental impact. See Earth Ministry for a great help in this regard: <http://www.earthministry.org/cfac.htm>.
- Create communities of support. The good news is that the changes ahead of us are not necessarily onerous but will lead to a life richer in community connections, in real wealth.
- Several books to consider
Simpler Living, Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective, Michael Schut (1999)
Economics in Christian Perspective: Theory, Policy and Life Choices, Victor V. Claar and Robin J. Klay (2007)
Food and Faith: Justice, Joy and Daily Bread, Michael Schut (2002)
Food for Life: The Spirituality and Ethics of Eating, L. Shannon Jung (2004)
Money and Faith: The Search for Enough, Michael Schut (2009)