

**Messages from Downunder: Fifth Parliament of the World's Religion**  
***Making a World of Difference: Hearing each other, Healing the earth***

**Listening with Indigenous Ears**

Elijah heard the still, small voice of God in a cave and found the strength and courage he needed; Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness to pray. From the waters of Genesis to the river of the water of life in Revelation, a close relationship to the earth is assumed in scripture. We are even made of *adam*, earth. The Spirit of God speaks to us through the natural world. Are we listening? Do modern, Western people remember how to listen?

Listening to the earth and respecting every living thing on it is at the heart of indigenous spiritual traditions. From Arctic people to aboriginal inhabitants of the vast middle of Australia, they listen to the land, the animals, the insects, the trees, stars, rivers, and even the wind, and they find instruction for daily life and wisdom for the healing the planet.

One of the topics that echoed throughout various seminars and programs in the Parliament of the World's Religions was a concern for the planetary environmental changes. In discussions that were not so much political as spiritual, various voices urged a regard for all land as sacred and all creatures as images of the divine.

Western culture has been quite adept at abstracting and objectifying land, which makes it easy to manipulate it and change it. But have we been good stewards as we were admonished to be in Genesis? Could the Western mind adopt some of the ways of thinking of indigenous peoples as a way to heal our relationship with the earth and all that lives on it?

Caleb Oladipo, professor at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond, Va., in one of the seminars listed some of the characteristics of indigenous thinking:

- 1) Time is not chronological. It is event oriented, non-linear.
- 2) God is known first through the cathedral of nature; the majesty of God is known through nature. Without nature human beings cannot know God. Interconnection to earth is at a spiritual level. Care of the environment is a sacred responsibility.
- 3) A strong sense of community and social cohesiveness is at the heart of their identity. If one suffers, all suffer. Their hope is that they belong to each other. "I am because you are."
- 4) There is openness to the primordial universe. One can cross at will between the empirical and spiritual worlds. There is no material world without a spiritual one in which there is spiritual power that is active and effective. God is over both worlds.

What would happen if we tried to see the world and our relationship to it through one of these lenses? What if we took time periodically to practice just "being" instead of "doing?" What would we hear and see and feel if we sat on a rock in our yard and just watched the ants and felt the breeze and got too cold or too hot and picked up a handful of dirt and squeezed it? Might the still, small voice of God speak to us of healing relationships with others and with the planet?

The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church has issued several documents calling for "God's Renewed Creation," noting that "...we see one interconnected system that is 'groaning in travail'

(Romans 8:22 RSV). The threats to peace, people, and planet earth are related to one another...."<sup>1</sup> In developing a process to repent to indigenous people for acts of racism, it seems that repentance for acts against the earth would be an important part of that repentance. We are interconnected in a web of all living things, and "if one suffers, we all suffer;" and if we have offended the land, we have offend those who listen most closely to it.

Betty Gamble

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<sup>1</sup> God's Renewed Creation: A Call to Hope and Action, A Pastoral Letter in Liturgical Setting from the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church. Also, *God's Renewed Creation: A Call to Hope and Action*, The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, Foundation Document, Adopted November 3, 2009.