

Greetings from the Alliance of Religions and Conservation

Hello – and welcome to our first newsletter of 2010. It looks set to be an action-packed year ahead, both for ARC and for people of faith everywhere who are concerned about the environment. In this newsletter:

1. News from Nigeria
2. Happy New Year of the Tiger
3. Lent Eco-promises
4. Why the religions are becoming big movers on the environment
5. World Economic Forum takes notice of faiths
6. Blogpost from Papua New Guinea
7. A word from the Daoists

1. News from Nigeria

Our colleague Alison Hilliard has just returned from a somewhat grueling but deeply inspiring trip to Nigeria – grueling because local unrest meant travelling around was difficult and both her mobile phone and briefcase went missing along the way. Despite these setbacks, Alison returned feeling enormously inspired by the meeting of Muslim and Christian faith leaders she attended in Abuja.

Hosted by the British Council, the leaders from Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa, Kenya, Sudan and Nigeria came together to talk about climate change. Africa is already suffering the effects of climate change through more floods, droughts and extreme weather conditions - but it is least equipped technically and financially to deal with climate-related risks.

Subsistence farming, the main source of Africa's food, is under threat because it mainly relies on rainfall that is becoming increasingly erratic, and diminishing water resources may force more people to become 'climate change refugees'.

Particularly exciting for us is that the representatives for the Anglican Church of Tanzania, the Anglican Church, Hoima diocese in Uganda and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church all expressed an interest in making long-term environmental faith plans, similar to the 31 plans by nine faiths launched at Windsor. (You can find those plans on

<http://www.arcworld.org/projects.asp?projectID=497>

Bear with us – we are getting a new website soon where they'll be much easier to access.)

- ❖ Also at the Abuja meeting, the BBC World Service Trust launched a fantastic new policy briefing on climate change in Africa. Its 'Africa Talks Climate' research asked more than 1,000 people from farmers to fishermen in 10 countries what they understood about climate change. It found some African citizens tended to attribute weather changes to God, gods or faith – which meant there was substantial potential for religious and faith leaders to play a role in informing and engaging the population in response to climate change. For the full country reports, link here:

www.africatalksclimate.com

2. Happy New Year of the Tiger

With Chinese, Mongolians, Tibetans and others all celebrating the start of the Year of the Tiger on February 14, faith leaders from all over Northern Asia are thinking about how they can use the Tiger Year to promote the protection of the big cats and other endangered species.

- Daoists have just embarked on an eight-year eco plan, assisted by ARC, and launched at our Windsor event, which includes prohibiting medicine made of endangered species including tigers, for all Daoist temples in mainland China.

- The Karmapa, head of the Tibetan Buddhist Kagyupa sect, has asked his one million followers to avoid eating, using or wearing products that may contain tiger parts. In an open letter, the Karmapa reminded his followers that Buddhism teaches equanimity and said: “We have to show compassion to all sentient beings. All life is equally sacred.”

He added: “We know from recent reports that there may be as few as 3,200 tigers left in the wild in all of Asia. It is no longer a matter of protecting them; we urgently need to save them from extinction now.”

- Shanghai Buddhists have prohibited the eating of any wild animals, both at home and in restaurants, as part of their long term environmental plan.

More details are here: <http://www.arcworld.org/news.asp?pageID=379>

3. Lent

Many Christians will have given up something right now, for Lent, which began on Wednesday, February 17, as they spend the next 40 days reflecting, repenting and fasting in preparation for Easter. This year, some groups are also promoting the idea of ‘eco-fasting’ as a way of benefitting the world, helping to protect vulnerable communities suffering from the effects of climate change, and raising awareness on the environment.

- The Church of England has linked up with the development agency Tearfund to produce a 40-day ‘carbon fast’ for Lent. Ideas include eating less meat, not using plastic bags, saving energy and giving up technology such as television, mobile phones and iPods. For more information, visit <http://www.tearfund.org/Campaigning/Carbon+Fast.htm>
- The Church of Norway has recognised the importance of Lent as a time for reflection, and in its Ten Year Plan calls for it to be a period in which Christians focus on their environmental involvement.
- Water For Life is a team of volunteers in Oregon, USA, who have come up with a great idea for Lent, Ramadan, Passover or any other holiday period. Give up expensive fancy coffees, sodas and bottled water, and drink water or other cheap beverages instead. Then give the money you save to fund water projects in developing countries. Their website is www.drinkwaterforlife.org.

For the first time for a long time the Orthodox Easter this year is the same day as the Western Christian Easter. So for people of both traditions the “fasting” lasts until the morning of Sunday, 4th April.

4. Faiths and the environment

Religions’ role in protecting the environment has become a major focus of attention as never before. That’s due to a number of key developments which have come together in recent weeks.

Firstly, it’s no exaggeration to say that our own Windsor Celebration in November last year www.windsor2009.org has helped bring about a radical change in the way secular bodies view the role of religions on the environment. It was the first major internationally coordinated commitment by the faiths to the environment and the 31 long-term action plans announced before Prince Philip and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon were not only seriously impressive but will have a far-reaching impact for years to come.

Secondly, the wrangling at the Copenhagen climate change conference in December last year, when the world’s governments found more to disagree about than to agree, has turned the spotlight firmly on what civil society – of which the religions are by far the biggest element – is doing.

And, thirdly, Pope Benedict XVI made his strongest ecological statements to date in January, emphasising that we cannot remain indifferent to what is what is happening around us, “for the deterioration of any one part of the planet affects us all”, and that protecting the environment is about protecting creation.

He has sent a clear message to the world’s 1.1 billion Catholics that protecting the environment is a moral issue, and he’s not alone. How we care for the planet is being pushed right up the agenda of faith leaders around the world – and even the powerful World Economic Forum is taking notice (see below). <http://www.arcworld.org/news.asp?pageID=374>

5. World Economic Forum

In January the World Economic Forum released a report in which it discussed the kind of values we need after the world economic crisis to create a sustainable future for us all. It also examined the role that faith plays in expressing those values. It was the first time the WEF had ever considered the role of religions in this way and represented “a strategic shift” in the WEF’s engagement of faith communities, the report said.

In this first report, entitled: *Faith and the Global Agenda: Values for a Post-Crisis Economy*, 16 religious leaders from different faith traditions reflected on the values needed for a more sustainable world. They called for a move away from “narrow economic self-interest” towards values of “integrity, solidarity, and care for the environment”.

An internet poll of 130,000 respondents in 10 countries, done for the report, supported this view, with more than two-thirds of people saying the current economic crisis was also a crisis of ethics and values.

For more information, visit

<http://www.weforum.org/en/Communities/FaithCommunities/index.htm>

6. Blog from PNG

We recently got an inspiring letter from a Papua New Guinea pastor about some eco-training he went to in the hills: <http://tinyurl.com/y8c7os9>

7. Quote of the day

We leave with this thought which, with its comment on simple living, is not only appropriate for Lent but is a good maxim for life. It comes from the Daoist sage Laozi, from Chapter 67 of the *Dao De Jing*

“I have Three Treasures, which I hold fast and watch over closely: the first is kindness, the second is simple living and the third is not to presume oneself to be the chief of the whole world.”

I’m delighted that this is the first newsletter written by my colleague Susie Weldon who is also now working on the Communications team. Hopefully this will mean that you’ll hear from us more often.

Best wishes!