

## **Water in a Sustainable Future**

### **"Let justice roll down like waters" (Amos 5:24)**

ECEN is a network of Christians across Europe contributing to the Conference of European Churches work on environment. Delegates at the 11th ECEN Assembly came together in Helsinki, Finland to share, learn, work and pray for access to enough safe water for all in a sustainable future. Even if we come from different heights above average sea level—consequently experiencing different effects of global warming—we share the limited availability of fresh water. We also share in the disruption of water and maritime life cycles, which have consequences for all people and all God's creatures.

The recent Paris Agreement on climate change highlighted the need and commitment to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change, to hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C. It is, however, hard to understand what this goal means for our everyday life.

In reality, a few degrees is not a significant range on our home thermostats, nor in daily weather. More than ten degrees can be the difference in temperature between morning and afternoon during a normal day. We have to strengthen the understanding of what the global 1.5 - 2°C means for everyday consequences in the lives of communities, churches, and wider society. Education and awareness raising is integral to this process within and beyond the churches.

Without doubt, water is one of the key mediums in the climate process. The World Water Council expressed at COP21: "Climate is Water!" Even if we may not immediately feel the shift of one or two degrees in temperature, we immediately feel the lack of drinking water or the destruction of flooding.

Therefore, we translate our concern, questions, and actions into the language of water. Moreover, water has a deep spiritual meaning and is central to many biblical narratives including the creation story and baptism.

#### **God's work through water**

Both the natural sciences and the bible testify that water is the source of all life. Christians believe that God works in numerous ways through water. Humans are created into close interconnectedness with water. Even our bodies consist mostly of water.

Water also teaches us humility: it reminds that there are powers vastly greater than humankind and can be highly destructive, especially as sea levels rise and flooding increases. Sea level rise is caused primarily by two factors related to global warming: the added water from melting land ice and the expansion of sea water as it warms. The frequency of severe flooding across Europe is set to double by 2050.

Flooding and water pollution not only affect human life, they also destroy habitats and other species.

Extreme weather events such as violent rain, hail, and snow storms can take life away, as can tsunamis and ocean surges.

In the Finnish land of a thousand lakes, we do not forget the millions who have no access to safe water. According to the World Health Organization, globally 663 million people (one tenth of Earth's human population) are living without access to healthy drinking water, and 1.8 billion people use unsafe water. In Europe, 100 million people still do not have a household connection to fresh water, and 67 million people have no access to improved sanitation. Human activities sometimes lead to pollution of precious drinking water resources. Industrial waste contaminates rivers and lakes, agriculture uses fertilizers and pesticides that find their way even into ground water. People are often unaware of the substantial use of fresh water supplies used in manufacturing many widely used and everyday consumer goods. This "virtual water" must increasingly be part of our conversations about water in a sustainable future. Drilling for fossil fuels produces waste water above and below the surface. This can be seen especially when using dangerous methods of hydraulic fracturing.

European citizens die every day from diarrhea resulting from unsafe water and poor sanitation and hygiene.

Jesus reminds us in many ways of the importance of water for life. He asked John to baptise him in the river of Jordan (Mt 3:13f). He asked the Samaritan woman at the well: "Will you give me a drink?" (Jn 1:7). At the end on the cross he said: "I am thirsty." (Jn 19:28). If our Lord had to ask for water several times, then it is no wonder that the access to water is also so crucial for us.

### **Water and Justice**

Water flows through natural circles and is continually revitalising the planet and all that lives on Earth. Yet our human industrial activity disrupts this hydrological cycle, speeding up the flows in some areas and eradicating it elsewhere. This brings about uncertainty and insecurity. Our community and national life is dependent on constancy, yet unsustainable lifestyles can undermine this.

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) all relate, directly or indirectly, to the importance of water to planetary and human well-being.

Yet the privatisation or marketisation of water, turning it from a gift into a profitable product or commodity also influences access and affordability. We so often exclude people from the natural supply of a God-given resource.

In the eyes of God water and justice are meant to flow like a stream—continually available to enhance abundant life for all.

### **A Call for Action and Hope**

We therefore encourage individuals and our churches to take action especially by:

- Re-emphasising the sacredness and wonder of water, and its role in sustaining life and ecosystems through the whole earthly creation as it reveals the glory of God.
- Exploring hopeful responses to the water challenges we face through our worship, liturgy and action.
- Raising awareness of the value we attach to water and its use in everyday life and reminding ourselves that water is a gift for life. This includes learning about the water footprint of food production, especially for meat, and the promotion of vegetarian diets.
- Improving the knowledge and understanding the many ways water determines the quality of our life, including drinking and sanitation and how it relates to climate change through sea and maritime life.

- Preserving precious fresh water and recognising how many litres of water we use for travel, food, hygiene, washing, and so on in our private and church life!
- Reducing our water footprints! Raising our voices for people who are constantly thirsty and have no access to clean drinking-water
- Drinking pipe-line tap water rather than bottled!
- Avoiding using harmful chemicals in agriculture, households, industry, and mineral and fossil fuel extraction.
- Reducing the excessive pollution and waste of our personal water use.
- Rediscovering more contemplative lifestyles based on the quality of life for all, rather than the quantity of goods for a few.
- Engaging in the ecological debate by empowering people to share the world's resources more equitably and promoting water as common good.
- Supporting vulnerable communities and countries as they struggle with climate catastrophe and uncertainty.

The problems of the world, such as those related to climate change and water, are very severe. Often it is difficult to be optimistic. However, we want to emphasize the significance and perseverance of hope. God is with us in all situations. So may we all work towards a better world, where justice more often flows like a rolling stream . . .

**ECEN Assembly participants, Cultural Centre Sofia, Helsinki, 14 June 2016**