God’s Renewed Creation: Call to Hope and Action: A Pastoral Letter from the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church

God’s creation is in crisis. We, the Bishops of The United Methodist Church, cannot remain silent while God’s people and God’s planet sufffer. This beautiful natural world is a loving gift from God, the Creator of all things seen and unseen. God has entrusted it to all of us, but we have turned our backs on God and on our responsibilities. Our neglect, selfishness, and pride have fomented: pandemic poverty and disease; environmental degradation; and the proliferation of weapons and violence.

Despite these interconnected threats to life and hope, God’s creative work continues. Despite the ways we all contribute to these problems, God still invites each one of us to participate in the work of renewal. We must begin the work of renewing creation by being renewed in our own hearts and minds. We cannot help the world until we change our way of being in it.

We all feel saddened by the state of the world, overwhelmed by the scope of these problems, and anxious about the future, but God calls us and equips us to respond. No matter how bad things are, God’s creative work continues. Christ’s resurrection assures us that death and destruction do not have the last word. Paul taught that through Jesus Christ, God offers redemption to all of creation and reconciles all things, "whether on earth or in heaven." (Col 1:20)

God’s Spirit is always and everywhere at work in the world fighting poverty, restoring health, renewing creation, and reconciling peoples.

Aware of God’s vision for creation, we no longer see a list of isolated problems affecting disconnected people, plants, and animals. Rather, we see one interconnected system that “goes in travail.” (Romans 8:22) The threats to peace, people, and planet earth are related to one another, and God’s vision encompasses complete well-being. We, your bishops, join with many global religious leaders to call for a comprehensive response to these interrelated issues. We urge all United Methodists and people of goodwill to offer themselves as instruments of God’s renewing Spirit in the world.

First, let us orient our lives toward God’s holy vision. This vision of the future calls us to hope and to action. "For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord, “plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jer 29:11) Christ’s resurrection assures us that this vision is indeed a promise of renewal and reconciliation. As disciples of Christ, we take God’s promise as the purpose for our lives. Let us, then, re dedicate ourselves to God’s holy vision, living each day with awareness of the future God extends to us and of the Spirit that leads us onward.

Second, let us practice social and environmental holiness. We believe personal holiness and social holiness must never be separated. John Wesley preached: “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social. No holiness but social holiness.” Through social holiness we make ourselves a channel of God’s blessing in the world. Because God’s blessing, care, and promise of renewal extend to all of creation, we can speak today of “environmental holiness” as well. We practice social and environmental holiness by caring for God's people and God's planet and by challenging those whose policies and practices neglect the poor, exploit the weak, hasten global warming, and produce more weapons.

Third, let us live and act in hope. As people in the tradition of John Wesley, we understand reclamation and renewal to be part of the process of salvation that is already underway. We are not hemmed into a fallen world. Rather we are part of a divine unfolding process to which we must contribute. As we faithfully respond to God’s grace and call to action, the Holy Spirit guides us in this renewal.

With God’s help and with you as our witnesses...

1. We as your bishops pledged to answer God’s call to deepen our spiritual consciousness as just stewards of creation. We commit ourselves to faithful and effective leadership on these issues, in our denomination, and in our communities and nations.

2. We pledge to make God’s vision of renewal our goal. With every evaluation and decision, we will ask: Does this contribute to God’s vision of renewal? Are we aware of the difference between what is and what must be, as we pledge to practice Wesleyan “holiness disassociation.”

3. We pledge to practice dialogue with those whose life experience differs dramatically from our own, and we pledge to practice prayerful self-examination. For example, in the Council of bishops, the fifty active bishops in the United States are committed to listening and learning with the nineteen active bishops in Africa, Asia and Europe. And the bishops representing the United States’ conferences will prayerfully examine the fact that their nation consumes more than its fair share of the world’s resources, generates the most waste, and produces the most weapons.

4. We pledge ourselves to make common cause with religious leaders and people of good will worldwide who share these concerns. We will connect and collaborate with ecumenical and interreligious partners and with community and faith organizations so that we may strengthen our common efforts.

5. We pledge to advocate for justice and peace in the halls of power in our respective nations and international organizations.

6. We pledge to measure the “carbon footprint” of our episcopal and denominational offices, determine how to reduce it, and implement those changes. We will urge our congregations, schools and settings of ministry to do the same.

7. We pledge, to the best of our ability, to provide the resources needed by our conferences to reduce dramatically our collective exploitation of the planet, peoples and communities, including technical assistance with buildings and programs, education and training, young people’s and online networking resources.

8. We pledge to practice hope as we engage and continue supporting the many transforming ministries of our denomination. Every day we will thank God for fruit produced through the work of The United Methodist Church and through each of you.

9. We pledge more effective use of the church and community web pages to inspire and share what we learn. We will celebrate the communications efforts that tell the stories of struggle and transformation within our denomination.

With these pledges, we respond to God’s gracious invitation to join in the process of renewal. God is already visibly at work in people and groups around the world. We re dedicate ourselves to join these movements, the movements of the Spirit. Young people are passionately raising funds to provide mosquito nets for their “siblings” thousands of miles away. Dock workers are refusing to off-load small weapons being smuggled to armed combatants in civil wars in their continent. People of faith are demanding land reform on behalf of landless farm workers. Children and young people have formed church-wide “green teams” to transform our buildings and ministries into testimonies of stewardship and sustainability. Ecumenical and interreligious partners persist in demanding the major nuclear powers to reduce their arsenals, step by verifiable step, making a way to a more secure world totally disarmed of nuclear weapons. God is already doing a new thing. With this Letter and the accompanying Foundation Document, we re dedicate ourselves to participate in God’s work, and we urge you all to re dedicate yourselves as well.

We beseech every United Methodist, every congregation, and every public leader: Will you participate in God’s renewing work? We are filled with hope for what God can accomplish through us, and we pray you respond: “We will, with God’s help!”

May God’s grace purify our reason, strengthen our will, and guide our action. May the love of God, the peace of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit be among you, everywhere and always, so that you may be a blessing to all creation and to all the children of God, making peace, nurturing and practicing hope, choosing life and coming to life eternal. Amen.