

Towards an Earth Charter **A North American Interfaith Contribution, March 1991**

Background Principles

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In June 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development will be held in Rio de Janeiro, and is widely being considered as one of the most important meetings in history. The conference may be the last chance to develop an international commitment to turn away from a path that is rapidly destroying and depleting the earth's resources, and that is undermining the earth's ability to sustain human and other forms of life.

The United Nations recently decided that the 1992 Conference will be convened at the level of Heads of State, and in recognition of the significance of that decision, the Conference is now officially being known as the Earth Summit. The objectives of the conference include the signing of Framework Conventions (Treaties) on Climate, Forests, and Biodiversity; the development of Agenda 21, an intergovernmental agenda to prepare for a sustainable 21st century; the initiation of legal, institutional and financial mechanisms to support such an agenda; and the adoption of an Earth Charter that articulates a new relationship between people and the earth.

The crisis that the earth and those who live on it face has many dimensions. There is a growing sense within many people -- both within the major faith traditions, and among the followers of a broad range of spiritual paths -- that the heart of the crisis is a spiritual one. From this perspective, the Earth Charter seems to be the natural component of the Earth Summit on which to focus.

What follows is an attempt to capture the spirit, thoughts and feelings of about fifty people -- from most of the world's major faith traditions -- who came together for a two day gathering to begin to formulate an interfaith contribution towards an Earth Charter. The participants included several who are recognized as international leaders on the issues of the religious and spiritual dimensions of the crisis of life on earth. A few were present as formal representatives of a particular faith or denomination; most who were there had no such formal status. There was a clear sense that all who were present were united in that their participation in the gathering grew out of a deep personal calling to respond to the crisis facing the earth and to all those who live on the earth.

The scope of a document such as an Earth Charter, and the breadth and diversity of perspectives that are embodied in the many faith traditions represented at that meeting mean that this can only be considered a tentative first step. It can only be considered a tentative first draft towards an interfaith perspective, and will undergo a succession of

revisions as those who were present at the gathering, and others have the opportunity to respond to this initial draft.

This contribution to an Earth Charter is one of many that are being formulated around the world. If the Earth Charter that is adopted in Brazil in 1992 is to become a document that speaks to the heart of the challenge that we face, if it is to be a document that can serve as a basis for uniting all people in a cooperative relationship among all forms of life on earth, then we must be sure to listen to the voices of all of us.

We will have to pay special attention to ensure that the voices of those who are suffering most, those who are most vulnerable, are heard. We will have to listen to the voices of the hungry, the oppressed, the isolated, the alienated. We will have to listen to the voices of women and of children, of the very old and the very young, and of those not yet born. We must pay very close attention to the voices of the indigenous people, whose culture and traditions are based on a balanced relationship with the earth, and whose communities and entire way of life is being threatened with extinction.

And as we proceed with formulating an Earth Charter, we must discover ways to listen to and incorporate the voices of the trees, of the birds, the animals, the insects and the fishes, of the whales and the dolphins, of the wind and the rain, of the mountains and the rivers, of the earth, and of the rainbow.

One of the many images that emerged during the gathering is that we are witnessing the birth of a new era of relationship between people and the earth, and that the formulation of an Earth Charter is one element of that birth. Perhaps we are being called to be midwives to that birth. The sense was that we may be in the late stages of labor, and that we must be prepared for more labor, but that we must also let go, relax, and let the birth take its natural course.

The meeting was held from March 20-22 at Wainwright House, in Rye, NY, and was organized by the International Coordinating Committee on Religion and the Earth. For additional information on the development of an Earth Charter from a religious and spiritual perspective, contact International Coordinating Committee on Religion and the Earth, c/o Wainwright House, 260 Stuyvesant Avenue, Rye, NY, or call 914 967-6080.

Some Principles for an Earth Charter

Overview - The formulation of an Earth Charter offers a remarkable opportunity to define the fundamental principles that govern the relationship of people with the earth. The opportunity brings with it an obligation to set the most rigorous standards possible for the development of the Charter.

Framework - The following comments are offered as a framework for the development of the Earth Charter:

The essence of the task is the discernment of the principles of sustainable, harmonious relationships that are actually embodied in the natural order;

In the discernment of these principles, rigorous standards of truth, of justice, of ethics and of integrity must be applied;

That as an Earth Charter is being developed, an active effort must be made to ensure that the voices of all be heard, with special attention to listen to those whose voices tend not to be heard by governments and those in positions of power.

Language - The quality of the language in which the Charter is expressed is vital. That language should be:

A universal language - A language of the heart, of the mind and of the soul. It should be simple, clear and inclusive, and should ring as true for a child as for a seasoned diplomat

A call to the highest of human qualities - A call for governments and individuals to engage in the process of healing the earth and healing our selves;

Principles - It is proposed that the Charter should reflect a deep consensus as to the fundamental elements that would include the following:

Life on Earth - An articulation of the fundamental qualities of living communities on the earth.

Earth as Mother - An acknowledgement of the dependence of all life on earth on the earth itself, and of the need to care for the earth as we should care for our mother;

Connectedness - An acknowledgement that all life on earth is part of a sacred community, is one web of life, and that as humans we are not separate from that web of life;

Diversity - In all life systems there is strength in diversity, the Charter needs to acknowledge this, and articulate principles that support, respect and protect the diversity of life, culture and of genetic resources;

Habitat - The Charter needs to acknowledge that care and attention to habitat is vital for the sustenance of life, and should support a legal framework that upholds the protection of habitat, not just of inhabitants.

Peace, Justice and Health - The need for conduct to be guided by principles of peace and justice and health.

Healing or Making Whole - The Charter needs to be guided by principles of healing, by a deep sense of what is meant by health -- at a personal, community, national and

international level. In this light too, justice needs to be based on the principle of making whole, of finding remedies, rather than of punishment and retribution.

Doing No Harm - The Charter needs to uphold conduct that is based on the principle of doing no harm. That principle is central to ways of healing, thus the Hippocratic Oath begins with the commitment to "First do no harm";

Equity - Basic principles of equity must play a central role in the Charter, and provide a framework for the equitable sharing of the earth's resources.

Conflict Resolution - Governments and institutions must be required to resolve conflicts without resort to force. This calls for a shift to the use both of new processes of "Getting to Yes" and of the rediscovery of mediation processes that have long been used in traditional cultures;

Participation and Inclusion - Ways of peace and justice require that all those with an interest in an issue have the opportunity to participate in its resolution. This involves a recognition that wisdom is not the exclusive province of those in positions of power;

Access to Information - A vital element that must be embodied, as a due process issue, is of assuring effective access to information to all those who seek it. This calls for an openness of government, and of governmental processes;

Enabling and Empowering - The Charter needs to uphold processes that enables and empowers individuals, communities and nations to take responsibility for effective means of meeting their own needs, within a framework of peace, justice and health.

People - The Charter needs to affirm the dignity of all people, and to acknowledge that we are all indigenous to the earth.

Indigenous People - There is need for an acknowledgement of the special wisdom of indigenous people and cultures that have maintained their connectedness to the earth, and of the need to listen to what they can teach us about ways of living in balance with the earth;

Minorities - The Charter must uphold and protect the rights of minorities, and provide guidance to governments and communities to respect and appreciate human diversity -- whether of race, culture, practice and belief;

Women - Most of the dominant cultures on earth are dominated by men. The Charter needs to uphold the equality of men and women in principle and in practice, to acknowledge the extent of women's contribution to sustaining life, and to heed the voices and values of women -- values that have tended to favor nurturance, gentleness and compassion rather than domination and pursuit of wealth and power;

Children - There is a need for attention to the impact of all decisions on our children "even unto the seventh generation" in recognition that it is they who will inherit the earth. This requires that decision making processes be attentive to ensuring that the concerns of children are heard and respected.

The Universal or Sacred - The Charter needs to acknowledge what has been perceived in different ways by virtually every culture on earth, namely that there is a universal, or sacred, dimension to life.

The Whole - Common to all faiths and religions is acknowledgement that we are part of a whole, and that we need to understand our own lives in the context of that whole.

Interfaith - The Charter needs to find ways of articulating the values that are common to the heart of all religions and faiths, in a manner that respects all spiritual traditions, and of those who profess no faith.

Listening to "that of God" - The Charter should guide us to listen to, seek and respond to "that of God", or the Light or the Spirit in all people and in all of the natural world, so that all our relationships and interactions draw upon the highest qualities that we know.

Individuals - If the rights and responsibilities of individuals are to be articulated in the Earth Charter, then it becomes vital that there is:

Input - Adequate opportunity for citizen (non-government) input into the formulation of the Earth Charter;

Ratification - Provision for democratic ratification of the Earth Charter, so that it becomes a document that is embraced by the people, not one that is imposed on people from above by governments or by the United Nations.