



## Orthodox Christianity and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

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Melhem Mansour (Syria) is a development activist, has worked on a number of UN and European Union projects in different social and sustainable development fields. He introduced ESD concepts and the Earth Charter in Syria through a series of projects in collaboration with the State Ministry of Environment and the Department of Development at the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Damascus in 2009. He has postgraduate degrees in Governmental Relations with Civil Society from the University of Glasgow in the UK and in Leadership Development from St. Francis Xavier University in Canada.

The connection between Orthodox Christianity, and the concept and purpose of sustainable development, goes back to the faith's Jewish roots. In Genesis, God creates this sphere of biodiversity – the Earth – and gives the first humans the authority to observe and control this biodiversity, an authority also passed down to all their descendants. This request, from God to Adam, directly reveals the definition of sustainable development: caring for God's creation. Rightly using this authority is key to maintaining the peace between humans and the rest of God's creation.

This witness to the importance of caring for God's creation continues throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Another important milestone in the Bible, clearly indicating a respect for biodiversity, was Noah's ark, which was commissioned to preserve two of every species of living animal. King David's Psalms also declare the respect of biodiversity and human diversity, calling upon all to glorify God together as the creation of this God, offering thanks. These Psalms show how each of God's creations have importance, and that a deprivation of any one of them affects all the others. God's creation was also glorified when God, according to the Christian faith, became a human being in Jesus – part of the creation. The teaching of the apostles, who followed Jesus, is that we must

invest in our natural resources based on our needs, without creating any kind of deprivation. In this way, humans are given the responsibility to care about Earth as the gift of God.

Based on this faith tradition, the Orthodox Church has developed a number of practices that continually remind us of our connection to the Earth. The calendar of the Orthodox Church starts with a day of prayer for nature and earth, as it marks the beginning of the harvest season on the first of September every year. In the services of the church, there are prayers which ask God to grant us, our children, and our grandchildren for the continued provision of food, the protection of our climate, and a peaceful earth without war and crisis – all of which are connected to the goals of the Earth Charter.

The Orthodox Church also regularly practices fasting, usually at the beginning of winter and the beginning of spring, seasons that are important in the life cycle of all creatures. This fasting is entirely vegan, eliminating all animal products, including dairy. The purpose of the tradition is to ask adherents of the faith to quit unnecessary lifestyles, and instead participate in sustainable lifestyles which both eliminate the gap between rich and poor, and strengthen the friendship between humans and nature.

For Orthodox Christians, even the church buildings serve as reminders of the connection between Earth and heaven. From the first era of their development, Orthodox churches have included various frescoes of ecological diversity. The actual design and architecture of the buildings represent the Ark of Noah, which was responsible for preserving the biodiversity of the creation during the Flood. These buildings also in many ways resemble ecological houses being built in many countries today because they depend on candle lighting, rather than electricity and energy. The architecture of an Orthodox church building is designed to direct the church towards the east, where the sun rises, so that the church receives the light of the sun - symbolizing the light of God - through the 12 windows in the dome, representing the apostles, or the three windows above the holy altar, representing the Holy Trinity. The church represents, for Orthodox Christians, "the paradise of God on earth" - and the frescoes and the design of the building remind followers of the rich ecological diversity present in paradise and the need to preserve that diversity until the end of time.

The leadership of the Orthodox Church has also become very involved in supporting sustainable development. The Ecumenical Patriarchate, the leader of the 400 million believers that are part of the Orthodox Church, has been given the title, "The Green Patriarch," because of his efforts to fight for ecological preservation and his commitment to the protection of God's creation. The Patriarchate of Antioch has also become involved by organizing the first national conference on Education for Sustainable Development in Syria, showing that the church has a vital role in sustainable development. This included organizing a series of art workshops in schools, as well as training workshops on Education for Sustainable Development and the Earth Charter. Other parts of the Orthodox Church, including the Patriarchate of Moscow, are also starting to lead national initiatives about environment and ecology.

This commitment to Education for Sustainable Development reaches Orthodox followers through a variety of different channels. Often, it is through the preaching during Sunday prayers, when faithful adherents gather together to pray and to listen. Also, the church has many of its own formal and non-formal educational institutions where ESD can and is being integrated, including schools and universities that belong to the church, as well as the Orthodox Youth Movement. In Syria, the development department of the Patriarchate has already started on this initiative through training workshops and a partnership with the state to develop national ESD and Green Economy action plans, with a focus on ethics of sustainable development.

These efforts are far from over. The Orthodox Church is a symbol of struggling towards the best for all humans, and so it will continue its efforts to co-lead and support sustainable development initiatives. These initiatives will focus on ESD, because education is the key for changing behavior of the generations to come. With proper education, our children and grandchildren will be able to commit to sustainable lifestyles, and to implement the church's mission of spreading the ethics of sustainable development through practical policies and actions plans in our societies. The church, as a part of its society, has the power to contribute for a positive change.