

Fish

[Aim: to examine the contrast between global questions of renewing and sustaining the earth and more local, countryside issues]

Story

A group of young people from a sixth form college was required to work on a project on environmental issues. These young people had spent time learning about global warming, environmental pollution, the depletion of the rain forests and other natural reserves, exploitation of animal populations, and over-use of fossil fuels. All of them were aware of the importance of recycling, conservation and resource management. Some, but not all, came from the Christian tradition.

In pursuing the project the students were asked to study the global question through a field trip to a rural environment in which these issues were being addressed. Problems ensued when one pair of students, Martha and Colm, pursued their enquiry in a small fishing village. Simple ideas about the evils of over-fishing and stock management quickly became complicated by what they learned about competition from foreign fishing fleets, EU regulations regarding fish harvests and the struggle for an adequate livelihood in the face of financial and market controls. As the young people learned more about the danger and difficulty with coping with the environment, they found their sympathy for the fishermen's work conflicting with their idealism and wider view of a global picture. Evidence

that people were bending rules in order to survive, also made it very difficult for them to reconcile their global vision with the day-to-day realities of earning a living and supporting families. This was especially true where the village was also involved in communally helping and sustaining families in which there had been fatalities at sea. Martha and Colm investigated how people could turn their hands to other kinds of business, but although there was some evidence for this, most of the people they talked to mentioned a fragile infrastructure entirely dependent on shared help. Branching out took workers away from what was left of the industry and made it ever more difficult to sustain it as a major part of village life and culture, which had otherwise kept going for generations and was commemorated in the monuments and windows of the largest local church. The village people were especially bitter that their small community was unlikely to survive competition from larger and better equipped fishing enterprises and that much of their spirit and life would end up as photographs and mementoes in a village museum.

Martha and Colm found it extremely difficult to apply their experience to their learned philosophy and began to see the process of writing up their project as hopeless. The people in the fishing community felt extremely distant from London and the EU, never mind the rest of the world. What they did know about was the local fishing environment, about the seasonal cycles for the catch, the relation of the catch to the local food chain, the effects of pollutants on fish and the effects of weather. They were extremely concerned for the effective management and preservation of the fishing environment and the place of human beings in that web of relationships. They were very concerned about those only interested in exploitation and

the manipulators of regulations and felt very depressed and cynical that they were always the last to be consulted, if consulted at all. Martha and Colm wrote up their project to reflect these attitudes and at assessment were asked to consider whether their experiences represented "an unusual case".

Discussion

One of the marks of mission states explicitly that we must strive to maintain the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the earth. This fits with a mission theological view that the creator God invites us to be partners in the creation by assuming responsibility for stewardship of the earth's resources. Further we are committed to limiting and repairing damage to the planet of which we are integrally a part. Our responsibility includes identifying the damage already done, understanding its consequences and finding ways of ensuring further damage does not occur.

Unfortunately the realities of daily life may mean that this becomes an idealistic luxury for the affluent. The relationship between local communities, government and global markets may be very unclear and in some cases unworkable. We need to understand the effects of globalisation upon all our industries and to work together to see what kinds of individual decisions affect our most local economic environments. This is especially true in the smallest communities where diversification may be more or less impossible. A true commitment to the five marks of mission means finding ways of accommodating our understanding of Christian stewardship to what is possible for these localities. We need further to know what the

relationship is between pastoral concern, missionary endeavour and political and ethical consequence. We need to be aware that sometimes thinking on this is simply inadequate or hopelessly idealistic, leaving responsible and caring Christians in the same quandary as Martha and Colm.

Some ideas for Bible Study:

Genesis 7:11-16

Matthew 4:18-22

John 21: 3-14

Acts 27

Choose one or two questions for discussion:

How far does our understanding of global concerns about conservation and resource management affect our daily lives?

Would you be prepared to go without for the greater good of animal or plant species? Or to protect the livelihoods of others? Say why you would or you wouldn't.

Do poverty, danger and hardship justify breaking rules? Say why they do or don't.

Possibilities for drama or role play

What might it feel like to go out in a storm, labour against the force of the elements and catch nothing? How would you describe the experience to your hungry family?

Develop a biblical story of storm, such as that of Noah, Jonah, the disciples or St Paul. What sort of emotions will you feel and what difference does faith make?

Develop together a story of rescue from the storm - what does it mean to be really thankful for being saved? What kinds of "rescue" (eg investment, support, more resources) could make a difference to your community?

Reflection:

What does God want of us as partners in sustaining and renewing our planet? What do we really mean by good stewardship and how can it be best exercised?

A Hymn and a Prayer

**For example, *Eternal Father, strong to save*
or *Sing to God new songs of worship***

God,

You came to the fishermen in their despair.

You calmed the storm, you helped them cast their nets.

Give us the wisdom to hear your guiding voice,

the faith to follow your words.

Amen