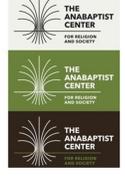




A Quest for Sustainability In a Globalized World

(A Discussion Paper)



We met online, seated in our respective homes, facilitated for the exercise by Zoom. Though we were a bit uncertain during the initial fifteen minutes of encounter with the new technology, we were eventually able to deal with the predetermined agenda. This virtual event was occasioned by the global pandemic of the COVID-19 coronavirus. Together with millions of people around the world, we had been rendered stationary by a common concern. And, with the rest of the world, we are faced afresh with challenge and opportunity. This situation at some level informs the notion of sustainability reflected upon here.

Who are we? We are members of the steering committee of the Anabaptist Center for Religion and Society (ACRS), founded in 2002. All of us have attained retirement age and beyond; all have had extensive exposure in countries around the world; all share a common faith heritage. As a steering committee, we are hosted by Eastern Mennonite University (EMU), informed by both on- and off-campus deliberations and initiatives. We are focused on, among other issues, a quest for ethical, societal, economic, and ecological sustainability in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia and elsewhere. We are aware that if the term *sustainability* is to have any relevance to an open-ended quest, it will require sustained interrogation. A basic definition of sustainability indicates that a given entity is sustainable if the rate of its exploitable or harvestable production is lower than the rate of its reproduction. Ecologists have long asserted that if all people on earth enjoyed the prevailing consumption rates in the United States, additional planets would be required. At a minimum, sustainability will require eternal vigilance and interrogation by engaged communities.

In our reflection and engagement, we at ACRS have interrogated our common faith history and praxis, including our respective personal journeys. The EMU administration has articulated and implemented a pace-setting “creation care” philosophy; EMU students and professors have formulated and carried out creative remedial eco-initiatives; EMU faculty and graduates have supported local and international creation care initiatives; and our general awareness of the global climate crisis has been informed by relentlessly dire and publicly available assessments.

We are descendants of recently arrived (early to mid-1700s) immigrants. After decades of harrowing persecution during and after the Protestant Reformation (1500s) in Europe, our ancestors arrived in the United States, which provided opportunity for economic and societal flourishing. However, a growing awareness of modern excesses and troubling doubts about sustainability have led to introspection and shifts in our thinking.



A nineteenth-century Mennonite leader in the vicinity of Harrisonburg, Virginia, by the name of Lewis J. Heatwole (1852–1932) reflected intently on the marvels of the natural environment. As a trained Madison College Normal School teacher and self-taught student of science, he traced the creative forces behind the complex geomorphology of the Shenandoah Valley and noted in detail how the mountain ranges that border and dissect the valley affect weather patterns. During his lifetime, the Shenandoah Valley was ravaged by extensive iron mining (1821–1865), resulting in the clear-cutting of vast sectors of the montane forests, harvested and used as fuel to produce pig iron. Heatwole noted with concern reports from administration authorities and resource experts that the destruction of the valley's forests was affecting the overall environment.

Only after the Civil War (1865) was there some respite from iron mining and the related destruction of forests in the Shenandoah Valley. Remedial action took the form of initiatives in the 1930s by the federal government to create the Shenandoah National Park and eventually to regulate state forests. But those initiatives provoked the ire of people who had long been settled on the mountains of the Shenandoah Valley and were now obliged under duress to vacate. To this day, descendants mourn that removal with rancor and public monuments.

Heatwole became a keen observer and an expert self-taught recorder of weather patterns. In 1868, he established the third weather station in the country in Dale Enterprise, a village several miles to the west of Harrisonburg. Two years later, the government commissioned the establishment of weather stations nationally, despite public opinion that the prospect of weather monitoring (recording, analyzing, predicting) constituted something of a hoax. Heatwole's expertise as weather monitor had meanwhile become recognized to the extent that he served as advisor to the State of Virginia, the United States government, and the League of Nations as the weather monitoring systems were being instituted.

If Heatwole's legacy is one of exemplary sensitivity to and appreciation for the geophysical environment that comprises the Shenandoah Valley, an editorial in the *Mennonite World Review* of March 19, 2019, cites the complicity of our ancestors in the destructive conquest of the North American continent: "From Pennsylvania in 1707 to the Great Plains in 1870s, Mennonites who settled in North America embraced the Promised Land narrative. Claiming a role in America's Manifest Destiny, they 'participated in conquest, follow[ing] closely behind the U.S. military, often tilling the soil where only a few years earlier, native homes and farms and hunting grounds had been.'" In the ensuing years, vast monocrops of wheat and corn have characterized Mennonite farming communities, an agricultural practice that has come under severe scrutiny in recent decades.

In 1962, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* marked the beginning of broad-based public awareness in the United States with regard to environmental issues. She focused on the use and abuse of pesticides in modern agricultural practice, citing the danger to both the health of the soil and the health of consumers of agricultural produce. She



identified human hubris and financial self-interest as the crux of the problem and posed the question: “Can we master ourselves and our appetites to live as equal parts of the earth’s systems and not as the master of them?” It was a prescient challenge.

By 1970, there was growing popular awareness of worldwide environmental degradation, leading to the first Earth Day in the United States. In April of that year, millions of Americans took to the streets to enhance ecological awareness and to “save the planet.” In the context of this fervor, EMU professors Kenton K. Brubaker and A. Clair Mellinger taught a course in the summer of 1971 on “Applied Environmental Science,” in which students studied water and air pollution in the watersheds of the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers. From February 29 to March 10, 1972, EMU held an interdisciplinary seminar entitled “Christianity and the Future.” According to an information brochure, the seminar was focused on the future of nature, humans, art, politics, and faith, informed by social upheaval, technological advances, and the growing awareness of environmental destruction.

A month after the seminar, EMU faculty and students met to move beyond talk to action, resulting in an initiative that came to be known as Earthkeepers. The initiative, co-chaired by an EMU faculty member and an EMU student, focused on recycling used newspapers from Harrisonburg. In the following years, the exercise became well organized, engaging students and EMU in a remarkable community-wide effort. Apart from its practical benefits, the initiative had the effect of enhancing environmental awareness among both students and faculty.

For purposes of sustaining its academic accreditation, EMU is obliged every decade to submit a quality enhancement plan. The most recently submitted document is entitled: “Peace with Creation: Environmental Sustainability from an Anabaptist Perspective.” This document, together with curricula and praxis by students and faculty, has two primary goals:

1. To strengthen our care for God’s creation by enhancing our knowledge, values and actions.
2. To increase sustainability practices at EMU.

When EMU submitted this document in 2010 to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, no other member university in Virginia featured such an in-depth commitment to environmental sustainability. Only a handful of other universities cited the environment as a concern.

In 2010, EMU installed solar panels on the roof of its Sadie A. Hartzler Library. At over one hundred kilowatts, this was at the time the largest institutional solar project in Virginia. Directly and indirectly, this initiative led to more than one hundred solar panel installations in the Harrisonburg vicinity, including on the nearby Park View Mennonite Church, the Mennonite Gift and Thrift store, and Eastern Mennonite School. Harrisonburg City Council is being lobbied and encouraged by former EMU students,



among others, to adopt a “renewable energy standard” for the city. At state level, the Virginia General Assembly has adopted an omnibus bill that includes the Clean Economy Act (2020), calling for a carbon-free electrical grid by 2045.

A survey in the Harrisonburg vicinity carried out by ACRS in 2018 identified dozens of initiatives that address some aspect of environmental concern. A number of these have been led by EMU graduates, who variously credit their alma mater for inculcating values informed by the imperative of creation care. Notable among these were the founders (1979) of the Harrisonburg Farmers Market, Samuel and Margaret Johnson. Their dream was realized after years of in-depth reflection, financial frugality, and hard physical work on their fruit and vegetable farm. Today the market, located on a prominent midtown site, is open twice a week, and hosts more than sixty vendors, many of whom are devoted to organic food production. In the countryside around Harrisonburg, EMU graduates are venturing into intensive small-scale farming, seeking to be faithful to the values of a sustainable productive environment. Others have committed to joint ventures involving landownership, forest preservation, and organic animal husbandry.

Approximately 50 percent of EMU’s graduating class of 1963 found employment or volunteer opportunity for mission, relief, or some form of development work in North America or elsewhere. In consequence, a substantial stream of observation, reflection, and writing distantly or immediately related to environmental concerns has taken shape.

The More-with-Less Cookbook (1976) by Doris Janzen Longacre was among the earliest Mennonite publications reflecting environmental awareness. Longacre rendered accessible the learnings of a globally dispersed corps of EMU graduates and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) service workers to an everyday readership in North America. Interspersed with compelling ethical and moral considerations, the author presents recipes and ways of cooking for responsible, wholesome eating and environmentally sensitive lifestyles. The book became a best-seller, with sales of 847,000 at the time of writing.

Another Mennonite environmental milestone was *Earthkeepers: Environmental Perspectives on Hunger, Poverty and Injustice* (1991), commissioned by MCC and assembled by Art and Jocele Meyer. It promoted widespread awareness of excessive lifestyles, the virtues of afforestation, the need for energy conservation, and the links between modern farming systems and environmental degradation, among other issues. In the mid-1980s, Art Meyer represented MCC US on the steering committee of the North American Conference of Christianity and Ecology.

Calvin W. Redekop’s *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World* (2000) was a pioneer Mennonite academic enquiry into the ecological, ethical, and theological principles regarding environmental sustainability. It was followed by many others.



In the second half of the 1980s, MCC's Global Education Desk began to address issues of climate change, biotechnology, strip mining, recycling, and reforestation, among other issues. In 1989 the Desk teamed up with its US Peace Section to become the Peace and Ecojustice Education Office, focusing on awareness of hunger, poverty, environmental degradation, and militarism. At the same time, the Mennonite Environmental Task Force was created, resolving to seek policy directions for the promotion of creation stewardship.

In March 2017, talks involving EMU, Goshen College, and MCC resulted in the formation of the Center for Sustainable Climate Solutions (CSCS). Other Anabaptist stakeholders include the Mennonite Biblical Seminary, the Mennonite Mission Network, Everence, and the Mennonite Creation Care Network, all of whom participated in the founding deliberations. The CSCS is hosted by EMU and implemented jointly by EMU, Goshen College, and MCC.

The stated vision of CSCS is:

“We envision Anabaptists fully engaged in actions which mitigate climate change, and Anabaptist perspectives influencing the larger climate conversation. We envision the church responding to climate change as a moral equivalent to peacebuilding.”

The stated mission of CSCS is:

“The Center for Sustainable Climate Solutions advances thinking and action in Anabaptist and other faith communities to mitigate climate change. Our work in research, innovation, education and collaboration catalyzes faith-informed, justice-focused activity that promotes sustainable living, environmental justice and care for creation.”

CSCS was established with a major gift from Raymond Martin, a former EMU student and a Goshen College alumnus, who was employed by USAID and the World Bank as a health expert. CSCS is a collaborative undertaking designed to mitigate climate change through the advancement of reflection and action within Mennonite institutions and throughout the Anabaptist faith community.

According to a survey by the universities of Yale and George Mason, Mennonites are among the 60 percent of Americans who are “alarmed” or “concerned” about climate change.

It can be assumed that the basis for such concern among Mennonites ranges over a spectrum of societal, theological, and scientific understandings. It can also be assumed that it might be possible to move toward a common future based on understanding of the physical universe in which we live, combined with focused action.

The January 2020 edition of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* includes two entries by EMU professor Peter Dula: “Anabaptist Environmental Ethics: A Review Essay” and “Anabaptist Creation Care Bibliography.” Both the essay and the bibliography



masterfully gather diverse Mennonite engagements, reflections, admonitions, and queries with regard to environmental matters.

ACRS Perspective and Action

This overview, focused on the issues of environmental sustainability and, more broadly, on climate change, reflects observations from the current ACRS vantage point. That perspective suffers from the fact that it does not represent the consensus of in-depth research; nor does it draw substantially from beyond the ACRS on matters related to sustainability.

It also suffers from the fact that we in the ACRS context can hardly claim to be direct victims of the ravages of climate change. We are in fact the beneficiaries of all manner of privileges, such as the metal, rubber, and fossil fuels for our cars, which have been extracted at great cost to the overall environment. According to accepted definitions of modernity, we are in the top tenth percentile of the most privileged people in the world.

Nevertheless, thanks to reflection, observation, scientific information, global experience, and the power of religious-ethical-moral imperatives, there are now myriads of mitigation initiatives underway within our immediate faith and local communities, and at state, country, and global levels.

Which considerations by this privileged ACRS group are most effectively focused on enhanced mitigation of environmental aberrations and which are best focused on the recognition of and engagement with paradigm shifts toward the enhanced well-being of this globe?

Minimum Consensus, Maximum Change

It is the consensus of the ACRS that all is not well with planet earth. Given that we are ensconced within and dependent on the modern world's production and consumption systems, a consensus on the nature and designation of its core maladies is not easily formed. Hence the variety and intensity of the prevailing mitigation initiatives. Hence also the absence of a common vision toward a sustainable flourishing biosphere. If our awareness until now of the earth's ecological fragility has been woefully partial, the urgency of consequent reflection on its future is inescapable. To this end, we must imagine and act beyond the present paradigms.

The Anatomy of Mitigation

“The action of reducing the severity, seriousness, or painfulness of something, e.g., the identification and mitigation of pollution.”



Virtually all of the initiatives cited in this overview toward some degree of creation care can be characterized as mitigation activities.

The Anatomy of a Paradigm

“A fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions, e.g., independently marshaled evidence can lead to a paradigm shift in the earth sciences.”

Amid the current doom and gloom assessments of the fragility of the earth’s biosphere, any evidence for the existence of an agreed viable paradigm for sustained life on earth at present levels is conspicuous by its absence.

Whence comes a new paradigm? In the quest for environmental sustainability, does a new paradigm evolve from an aggregation of mitigation activities? Do recognized anomalies in the current accepted paradigm give birth to a new paradigm? Does it become evident as a result of intense human reflection? Is it revealed spontaneously to an individual human genius, an Einstein?

Is the appearance, formation, or identification of a new paradigm for viable life on earth enhanced by intense focused inquiry by a configuration such as the ACRS?

Or by the pursuit of specific praxis?

“What Ifs”: From Mitigations to Mini Paradigm Shifts

- a. Imagine that homeowners in a suburb (e.g., Parkview in Harrisonburg) would agree to have all their houses equipped with solar panels and that for such purposes the homeowners would collectively negotiate concessionary purchase and installation costs.
- b. Imagine a corollary action by the city council to issue building permits favoring or mandating structures with southern roof exposure to accommodate solar panels.
- c. Imagine such initiatives were accompanied by an agreement among car owners in that same suburb to purchase electric cars en masse on the basis of carefully negotiated purchase prices.
- d. Imagine access to free recharging for all electric cars in the suburb.
- e. Imagine the effect of such initiatives on the deliberations of the Harrisonburg City Council.
- f. Imagine the effects on and responses from Harrisonburg Electric Commission and on Dominion Energy policy deliberations.
- g. Imagine the effects of an initiative to transform one of Rockingham County’s largest crops, home lawns, into small-scale vegetable plots serviced by what are now battalions of lawnmowing and landscape-maintenance agencies.



- h. Imagine the establishment of corner kiosks that would sell the vegetables from the converted lawns.
- i. Imagine that nurseries currently devoted to the production and sale of decorative and aesthetically pleasing scrubs, bushes, and trees would be converted into the promotion of vegetation and silviculture praxis that would be maximally productive of oxygen, that would form a welcoming environment for insects, birds, and wild animals, serving additionally as eco-regenerative forest cover.
- j. Imagine that faith communities everywhere engaged in an annual tree-planting exercise.
- k. Imagine the development of a vision for a post-fossil-fuel economy.
- l. Imagine flourishing communities on this limited biosphere, our common home.

Into the Future

Issues cited below are intended as discussion stimulants, inviting reflection on mitigation initiatives and paradigm shifts.

1. Theological and Prophetic Imperatives

A Redeemed World. We hear the constant refrain in Christian circles that ours is a fallen, disheveled world. In his writings, the Apostle Paul suggests otherwise:

“For in him [Christ] all things were created: things in heaven and things on earth ... God was pleased ... through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace ... on the cross” (Colossians 1:19).

We live, according to Paul, in a redeemed and reconciled world, awaiting engagement with reconciled people.

Laudato si’. There is a growing sense within faith communities and scientific circles that everything in the universe is interrelated. In his left-of-center encyclical, *Laudato si’*, Pope Francis writes: “We Christians have incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures ... nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute dominion over other creatures ... biblical texts tell us to till and keep the garden of the world. Tilling refers to cultivating, ploughing or working while keeping means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature.”

The Prophet. “The prophet engages in futuring fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, *for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined.* The imagination must come before the implementation. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one [that] the *king* wants to urge as the only thinkable one” (*The Prophetic Imagination* by Walter Brueggeman, Fortress Press, 40th anniversary edition, 2018).



Dreaming Visions. Eco-theologian Thomas Berry says the universe is so amazing in its interrelatedness that it must have been dreamt into being. He also says our situation today as an earth community is so desperate—we are so far from knowing how to save ourselves from the ecological degradations we are a part of—that we must dream the way forward. We must summon, from the unconscious, ways of seeing that we know nothing of yet, visions that emerge from deeper within us than our conscious rational minds (Richard Rohr).

2. Caring Awareness within Our Place

At global level, evidence for climate change is irrefutable. By contrast, our immediate physical environment and weather patterns here in the Shenandoah Valley appear to be comparatively stable. However, that stability may not last long. Indeed, the current conditions may represent a great improvement over conditions prevailing 130 years ago. At that time, indigenous montane forests in this valley were being clear-cut to facilitate iron mining, but have since been replaced with second- and third-growth forests. Given that “weather” (as a recordable, quantifiable, predictable, comparable reality) is a fairly recent “discovery” (1860s–1870s), and given that comprehensive rainfall records and weather patterns for the Shenandoah Valley covering the past two to three hundred years are not available, how, in this place, does a concerned public sustain appreciation for and enlightened stewardship toward environmental sustainability?

3. Beyond Fossil Fuels

There seems to be a general consensus among concerned environmentalists that the modern global economy must shift from dependency on fossil fuels to renewable or sustainable energy sources. Debate regarding the role and viability of the various renewable energy sources continues in creative ways. Given these circumstances, which are the relevant expectations for a viable paradigm in support of sustainable life on earth?

4. Flourishing beyond Sustainability

Much of current concern for the environment resides in the realm of mitigation: do less harm, refrain from excesses, seek a return to balance with the natural order, live within our ecological means, and so on. Can we imagine and render life on earth a flourishing rather than merely a “sustainable” reality?

Given the identified limitations of the earth’s resources, which visions and deliberations would be required to identify a viable human community on a sustainable planet earth?

5. The End of the Technological Promised Land

The productive miracle of the modern world has reached serious limits. Unintended consequences have appeared in the form of increasing levels of CO₂, triggering

pervasive harmful chemicals, cascades of waste, degradation of land and oceans, relentless population growth, and global climate change. Scientists have concluded that the earth's maximum carrying capacity of human life is rapidly reaching its limit, generally believed to be 11 billion people. In Garret Hardin's classic reflection "The Tragedy of the Commons," he describes the inherent logical and physical contradictions of unrestrained growth in human population, in all manner of production and excessive consumption on finite planet earth. The conclusion: there is growing acknowledgement of an absolute limit to an ever-increasing human population, to unlimited production and consumption with its concomitant deleterious effects on this finite planet. (Adapted from 'Eight Theses' by Calvin Redekop and Norman Kraus.)

6. "The future is already here—it's just not very evenly distributed." (William Gibson)

7. ACRS in Support of Mitigation and Paradigm Shifts into a Viable Future

How can the myriad mitigations now underway be celebrated and enlarged?

How can paradigm shifts toward the future be anticipated, interrogated, described, and acted upon?

8. Where does the promise of a "new heaven and a new earth" reside?

By
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