

WILLIAM E. GIBSON: The Man and his Work (1921 - 2006)

Memorial Service Talk by Dieter Hessel* at First Presbyterian Church, Ithaca, NY, 10/28
Scripture Readings: Psalm 146: 5-10; Romans 8:18-19, 22-23, 28

All of us gathered here have fond memories of Bill Gibson—in meetings, presentations, conversations, meals, and daily interactions. As James Nash, a colleague in the Christian Ethics guild, noted with a few choice words, “Bill’s extraordinary character was evident in an abundance of ordinary events.” Amen! Just imagine how many persons – students, faculty, community leaders and fellow Christians -- in Fayetteville, West Philadelphia, Rochester, and Ithaca -- were positively affected by one gracious, determined, and articulate Presbyterian campus minister named Bill Gibson, who thought deeply, spoke persuasively, and actually practiced what he preached, **walking his talk**, encouraging others to follow suit in their daily life and work. He was definitely one of the Presbyterian Church’s natural treasures.

I experienced Bill Gibson as a steady, constructive friend who wrote eloquently and spoke directly with prophetic insight and theological clarity about the world situation, and how we should respond. He called participants in higher education, in environmental and social action groups, and in the churches **to serve ecology and justice together**. His “campus” was large: it encompassed human society, the natural world, the university, the ecumenical church, as well as groups acting for social justice, peace, and integrity of creation. For decades, he went out of his way to direct our attention to what was and is going on in all of these arenas. He did it graciously and thought it through theologically.

I contacted other venerable friends of Bill, some of whom go much further back into those “early” fifty years of ministry in other locales, working for racial justice and peace -- before I met him. Our mutual friend Dean Lewis, who preceded me as the Presbyterian Church’s social policy director, recalls:

“Bill Gibson was not only a prophet who saw clearly and spoke boldly the truth of the ecological disaster we continue to fashion for our weary world. He was also deeply engaged in the works of justice, always with strategic intelligence and unrelenting leadership for both his beloved Presbyterian Church, and the wider religious and secular community. Bill was a gentle warrior, never wavering in commitment to the struggle but never losing hope or falling into bitterness. We do not see his like often and mourn his loss, even as we celebrate the gifts he shared with us and the legacy he leaves.”

Another long-time friend, Norman Faramelli, the Episcopalian priest and scholar who co-
led the eco-justice movement at the outset, told me,

“My memories of Bill go back to those days in the early 70's when I was directing the Boston Industrial Mission and Bill was beginning his eco-justice project at Cornell. I remember being asked to keynote one of his conferences, where he brought together not only folks from various religious communities and environmental groups, but also academics from Cornell. Bill was always concerned that environmental issues not be

separated from the wider concerns for social/economic justice. Most of the environmental movement in those days was not on that wavelength, nor were the academics. Some felt that the justice issues were a diversion from the real ecological issues.

”Over the years I saw his work develop, but always with that dual emphasis on ecology and justice. With regard to the eco-justice vision, we are in a better place today than in the early 70's, and we are grateful to Bill for all the work that he did to promote it.”

In the introduction to his 2004 book, *Eco-Justice – The Unfinished Journey* published by SUNY Press, Bill confessed that he had served as a minister in higher education for twenty years before acquiring eco-justice vision.

“In all that time I believed firmly that justice in the social order was inescapably imperative for Christian faithfulness and responsible human action, but I did not yet understand justice in its ecological connections and dimensions. A major early step in my awakening came with the first Earth Day, in April 1970 – not just the day itself but the entire academic year leading to it.”

The next year, Bill was finishing his Ph.D. dissertation at Union Theological Seminary, NY, discussing patterns of contextual Christian ethics with his faculty advisor, Prof. Beverly Harrison. (Both of them held Underwood Fellowships for campus ministers.) His doctoral studies prepared Bill to discern quickly the **ominous new context** we were beginning to face: polluting economic enterprise, destructive economic integration, and ever widening gaps between rich and poor, in a hotter, more crowded and violent world. This led him, working with other nearby campus ministers, interested faculty, students, and laity, to start a monthly study group on *The Limits to Growth* that met at the Seneca Falls Presbyterian Church. Referring to themselves as “The Club of Seneca Falls,” they began to develop a program and to plan for educational resources combining the concerns of ecology and justice, to be explored with careful analysis as well as ethical depth.

The program Bill initiated became the Eco Justice Project and Network (EJPN), co-sponsored by Genesee Area United Ministries in Higher Education and by the Cornell University Center for Religions, Ethics, and Social Policy. The Project conducted “extensive education and outreach to churches, campuses, and communities.” That endeavor and the larger body of Bill’s work -- often done in collaboration with others -- focused on the big picture of the crisis as well as specific environmental problems along with issues of hunger, energy, lifestyle, sustainable economy, good work, peacemaking, and environmental justice for people of color and women – all in eco-justice perspective.

To disseminate the message and to circulate insights from prominent thinkers as well as grassroots voices, Bill edited a quarterly journal with the name, The EGG. (A decade later, as he approached retirement, Bill also drafted me to edit The EGG for a couple of years.) You can read a selection of excellent articles from that journal in his 2004 SUNY Press book. The Journal’s funky name led to some joking, in response to which I offer the beautiful 1990 Earth Day poster depicting planet Earth as an egg in a nest.

If you are still not convinced, let’s shift the image from egg to bud, informed by the words of Denise Levertov, one of Bill’s favorite poets:

“We have only begun to love the earth. We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life. How can desire fail? We have only begun to imagine justice and mercy, only begun to imagine how it might be to live as siblings with beast and flower, not as oppressors... We have only begun to know the power that is in us if we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle. So much is unfolding that must complete its gesture. So much is in bud.” (*Candles in Babylon*, 1982)

In his 1984 presentation to an audience of preachers (“Eco-Justice: New Perspective for a Time of Turning,” in D. Hessel, ed., *For Creation’s Sake*, Geneva Press, 1985), Bill Gibson defined eco-justice as “the well-being of all humankind on a thriving earth -- an earth productive of sufficient food, with water fit for all to drink, air healthy to breathe, forests kept replenished, renewable resources continuously renewed, and nonrenewable resources used as sparingly as possible... On a thriving earth, human well-being is nurtured not only by the provision of these material necessities but also by **a way of living** with the natural world that is **fitting**: respectful of the integrity of natural systems and of the worth of nonhuman creatures, appreciative of the beauty and the mystery of the world of nature... A thriving earth is not conquered but cared for.” Why? Because we can see the image of God in creation as a whole, not only in human animals!

A major product of EJP work in the 1980s was the publication and use of the small-group study manual, “A Covenant Group for Lifestyle Assessment.” It emerged from a team of folks that Bill brought together to nurture an alternative vision of the good life in contrast to the consumerist, throwaway society, and to do so through church-based support groups. It was tried out and refined in many locales, and Earl Arnold who often introduced the manual to church groups, edited a revised version. Much of the material in that 12-session curriculum is still in circulation, thanks to some thoughtful recycling (done with permission) by a lively organization in Seattle called Earth Ministry.

Another of Bill’s crucial contributions was to write and talk about the basic values and virtues that shape eco-justice ethics. Responding to environmental research and earlier ecumenical discussions, he unpacked an interrelated set of four ethical norms: solidarity with Earth and people, ecological sustainability, sufficiency for all, and fair participation. These four deep, practical values illumine where we should go and how to get there.

Bill Gibson did many things to further the thought and action of the Presbyterian Church. Perhaps his most significant contribution was as consultant and writer for the denomination’s task force that produced the study book, *Keeping and Healing the Creation*, and then the 1990 General Assembly policy statement, *Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice*, where the whole denomination was introduced to the ethical norms I cited above. Bob Stivers of Tacoma, WA, who chaired the task force, emphasizes that

“Bill worked tirelessly on those documents, and he wrote eloquently, always with sensitivity to the needs and concerns of those who participated.”

In those publications and many other shorter presentations and essays, Bill Gibson voiced higher expectations for the church than did the church’s official leadership. They seldom

grasped the implications of the cogent theological affirmations and ethical themes that he articulated and then were incorporated in statements adopted by church bodies.

Denominational programs and Sunday liturgies haven't shown much environmental seriousness, and the profligate lifestyles of many church members (the Gibson household to the contrary!) have not kept pace with increasing environmental abuse and economic injustice. **The tundra has been melting at startling speed, and people on every continent are lacking human rights or sinking into deeper poverty, but religious hearts have barely warmed to meet inconvenient environmental and social truth.**

The typical pattern among us Christians is still to "violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care." (See the Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith)

Therefore, we have to ask, **can these ecclesial bones live?** (Ezekiel 37 presents a vision of God breathing life into the dry bones by the power of faithful human prophecy and nature's four winds.) Bill Gibson would certainly affirm the possibility, because he trusted God's redeeming purpose. He firmly believed that faithful speech and action do expedite our petition in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done, on earth..."

No wonder Bill helped to organize the churches ecumenically into an Eco-Justice Working Group of the National Council of Churches, that we launched in the mid-1980s. And no wonder that Bill teamed up with other Presbyterians to start and strengthen a denomination-wide interest group and network named "Presbyterians for Restoring Creation," currently active in many Presbyteries. It prods the church as a whole and provides a way for the laity to act more readily than does the typical congregation.

I think we are at a tipping point in public and ecclesial response to the environmental challenge. We have no choice but to accept this urgent moral assignment of our time, and to live into it. The question is no longer whether people awaken to the environmental crisis, but how they, and we, respond.

That's where eco-justice vision, values and actions become so relevant. To borrow a phrase from Alice Walker, "we are the ones we have been waiting for." We are the ones we've been waiting for to nurture and strengthen earth community—from the ground up. Bill Gibson wanted us to see this as a continuing journey. Eco-Justice is both the goal we seek and the way for us to actively participate. I conclude with Bill Gibson's own words that open the 1990 PCUSA policy statement, "Restoring creation is God's own work in our time. The Creator-Redeemer calls us all to become faithfully engaged..."

Prayer: O God, whom we trust to redeem creation and us within it, grant us wisdom and strength for our earth-restoring vocation. We praise and thank you for Bill Gibson who faithfully pioneered this journey and inspires us to continue with hope. May he know ongoing joy and peace, surrounded by your everlasting love. Amen.

* Dieter T. Hessel, Ph.D., a Presbyterian minister who specializes in social ethics, now resides in Cape Elizabeth, ME. In 1992, he began the ecumenical Program on Ecology, Justice and Faith. From 1965-1990, he coordinated adult social education and directed social policy studies of the Presbyterian Church (USA).