

# ECEN Assembly 2023

## EVERY PART OF CREATION MATTERS

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### Keynote presentation

*“Every part of creation matters”*

Bishop emeritus Peter Fischer-Møller, Church of Denmark

Words, words, words. We don't need more words, we need action.

This has for some years been the message from Greta Thunberg and other young climate- and sustainability activists to decision-makers around the world fighting to make it clear, that every part of creation matters.

And I agree.

In spite of this I'll use the next 20 minutes or so on words, arguing that words from the religious, liturgical or poetic vocabulary can give important perspectives to the ecological problems we face, and contribute to new courage to action.

Dear climate-, ecological- and ecumenical colleges and friends.

It is a great honor, privilege and joy to be invited to give a key note presentation opening this very important general assembly in ECEN.

I'll sketch the critical situation we globally are facing.

I'll in 3 pictures give you my perspectives, my ways to face the situation.

I'll relate these three pictures to trinitarian theology.

I'll very shortly show, that this green trinitarian theology is not something invented recently to match our present ecological crisis, but it has roots back to the church-fathers.

Finally I'll reflect on the situation and the role of ECEN.

You all know - many of you surely in more detail, than I'm aware of- the serious ecological situation we face:

- The ongoing temperature raising and the still more unpredictable climate development mostly due to the continuing use of fossil fuels in huge scale, deforestation and other types of human activities.
- The pressure on the biological diversity of Planet Earth is approaching a critical state making scientists predicting a sixth mass-extinction of living species.
- The rather new broader public and political awareness of how serious the situation is, but also a lack of willingness to act accordingly personally and as societies, locally and globally.
- The unwillingness and fear to address the core problem: the continuous growth in economy linked to growth in production and consumption and use of natural resources.
- The illusionous hope, that we can engage in a “green growth” which makes it possible for us - especially us in the western and economically privileged world - to continue our way of life more or less undisturbed, expecting that technological development can solve the situation for us.

And you are all as people of the churches of Europe in different ways engaged in considerations and activities related to green change in churches and society.

For many people - especially many young people - future seems dark.

The number of problems seems overwhelming.



Climate depression is a still more common diagnosis.

In this situation I want to begin somewhere else than in the ecological crisis.

I want to begin with JOY - with the joy of bird watching. I think it is necessary to begin with the joy of nature which most people sometimes or often experience. If we don't feel joy experiencing nature, if we don't value nature, if we are not fascinated by nature, we will never find the will and energy to protect it.

So this is my first story, my first step on my path to green theology and green engagement, my personal green pilgrimage so to say.

I was 13 years old, newly confirmed and starting in a new class in a new school. A bit frightening for a not very courageous boy from an ordinary Danish academic, upper middle-class, not-church-going welfare family.

A few weeks after having started, I got a friend who was member of the Danish Ornithological Association. He invited me to join him on his birdwatching in the local botanical garden. I borrowed my father's old maritime binoculars, and a new world began to open for me.

Of course I had been aware, that there were different birds, swans and swallows, sparrows and hawks. But that there were several different sparrows, swallows and birds of prey I first now realized. Soon my father's old binoculars were replaced by a KOWA 10 times 50, and the birdwatching took speed. I made a small bird-diary noting alle the birds I'd seen. And as I believe other new and young bird-watchers have experienced, I noted a number of rare birds, which turned out to be more ordinary ones.

I became a member of the ornithological association myself, and joined excursions with experienced ornithologists, which knew where to find some of the rare birds not only in Roger Torry Peterson "The birds of Europe", but in real life.

Knowing more birds and knowing more about the behavior and ecology of the birds, the joy for birdwatching developed. It was really a joy to expedience how nature expanded alongside the list of birds I'd seen.

I simply saw more, when I could recognize the different birds and knew their names and habits.

What you don't have words for, you easily oversee or forget. Words and names give you the opportunity to fix impressions in your mind, to remember and to relate, what you have seen to, what others have seen and to your earlier observations.

In this way it is true, what is written in the Bible, and what the Danish pastor, poet and reformer NFS Grundtvig frequently underlined: The word creates, what it mentions!

When I many years later began to study theology, I saw my experience reflected in the mythological tales in the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 2, where Adam gives names to the animals.

This story has lately been seen as an example of the anthropocentric perspective of the biblical narrative, an anthropocentric perspective, which has been one of the causes of the present ecological crisis.

And it is true.

But it is also true, that the story expresses the importance of language, of how language opens the world for humans, opens for the JOY of being a part of life on this unique small blue and green planet in the infinite universe; how words and languages opens our ability to se the relations between the millions of living creatures, giving us the possibility to take responsibility for the future life on Mother Earth.

Every part of creation matters.

And words matters.

From the theological and ecclesiastical tradition we have a language to offer, a language of hymn



singing, prayer and liturgy.

A language with words like: Gods creation, stewardship, sin, justice, solidarity, reconciliation, hope – and yesterday we were reminded, that we need to translate at least some of these words to make them understandable for not so often church going people. So sin could be translated into: greed, selfishness and apathy.

I'm convinced, that it makes a difference, that it gives another perspective, if we instead of or as a supplement to talking of natural resources speak of nature as Gods creation.

The second story, my second step on the way to engage in green theology and green action, comes from one of my first lessons in chemistry in school.

A new and very skilled teacher should learn us about atoms and molecules, the building stones of the universe we see, how small they are, and how many they are. He gave us two exercises.

We should imagine the first Danish king, king Gorm the Old (living around 900 BC) lying on his dead-bed in Jelling in Jutland. He was really old and weak, taking his last breaths, inhaling and blowing out. We were then asked to figure out how many molecules this last breath of King Gorm contained. To help us we had several formulas, and quite quickly we came to a figure with a lot of ciphers. We now realized that atoms and molecules must be very small, but still it was rather abstract and distant to us.

We then had the next exercise. We should imagine that the atoms and molecules from this the last breath of king Gorm the Old for 1000 years had been distributed in all the atmosphere. And we should figure out how often we would meet one of these air molecules. We were instructed about the height of the atmosphere and how to calculate the volume of the atmosphere.

I had thought that finding one of molecules from the old kings last breath would be like finding a needle in a haystack. But the result was quite different. Every time you breathe you inhale one of the molecules, which Gorm the Old exhaled in his last breath. And it is true! One of my friends is a chemist, and he made the calculation for me recently. It is really true. To some of the girls in the class it was a bit scary. In the next break they were focusing on their breathing, as if trying to avoid too many of the molecules from this old king of whom we knew little of his toothbrushing. To me it was the most astonishing and fascinating I'd ever learnt in school. Imagine being in this way in permanent chemical contact not only with an old Danish king, but with all living beings past and present. Breathing also one of the molecules from the first small cry of a baby boy born in a stable in Betlehem some 2000 years ago - or the last breath of man on a cross some 30 years later. Sharing air molecules with the disciples being breathed upon by Jesus saying: Receive the Holy Spirit. Maybe The Holy Spirit really is at work in something as basically as our sharing air with each other!

My third personal green story is linked to the memory of the baptism of my first grandson.

The most mind-blowing experience for many people or at least for me, was the birth of my first child. Being fascinated by natural science since I was a boy, I knew much about the development of natural life and the development of human beings from conception to birth. But to experience a child coming to this world is a miracle. A child as millions of other children and yet something, someone quite unique. A person with its own features and character from the first breath. Becoming parents is really something great. But to become grandparents is in a certain way even greater, because you have a longer perspective and better time to reflect on what is going on. This I experienced, when my first grandson was baptized in the same church where his father had been baptized 28 years before. Two perspectives were illuminated by the baptism. The first: We can easily think: what has a single human being of importance in the universe, on this Planet Earth among billions of other humans and creatures. In the baptism we are told: You are Gods child, Gods



human being. Your value as a person is not something you have to deserve. Your value is not for sale. You are known and loved by God as you are - no matter what. And in spite of the mess, you sometimes makes out of your own and other people's lives. This is Gods solidarity with us. Gods trust in us - Despite all. This is the core of incarnation.

The second perspective is the responsibility to the coming generations. And not only to humans. Gods solidarity with his creation in his incarnation is not limited to humans but concerns all living beings.

Thus the baptism of my grandson underlined the value of every human being and our responsibility for God's creation.

Seen in a theological perspectives these 3 small personal stories could form a kind of trinity. The first related to God as the creator of heaven and earth, the second related to God as Holy Spirit, as the life-giving spirit without which we could not live at all, the spirit which also still inspires us and gives us hope. The third story is related to God as the Son of Man, our Savior and brother relating to every one of us, not leaving anybody behind.

To me, and in the greater part of Danish theological tradition Green Theology has mostly been linked to theology of creation.

As a part of Nordic revival of theology of creation K.E. Løgstrup in the post 2. World War period developed his now widely known and acknowledged theology of creation. One of his pupils professor Ole Jensen developed this theology further and was the first to make a kind of theological manifest on the Danish theological scene with the book form 1972: "Capturers of growth".

During my engagement in the green theology I realized, that green theology is not a new phenomenon, but have roots back to the church-fathers. To Irenæus from the second century in his "Adversus Hereses", underlining that Christianity has its roots in the biblical stories of God's creation of heaven and earth. To Athanasius who in the fourth century in his work on the incarnation reflects on the fact, that God's incarnation in Jesus Christ is not solely related to human existence, but the word becoming flesh has to do with all living beings. And to Basilios the Great in the fifth century in his work on the Holy Spirit developing a trinitarian theology and making it clear in writing and church praxis, that theology is not only thoughts in heads or letters in books, but life being shared with other people in societies and with all other living creatures on earth.

Lastly I would reflect shortly on the situation and future of ECEN.

The ecological crisis is here. It is urgent to make people and especially the decision makers aware, that nice talks and good will is not enough. The situation calls for immediate action from all of us, and especially us in the rich western world, in order to avoid crossing more planetary boundaries and losing the possibility to stabilize the lifegiving and life sustaining ecosystems of the earth.

Every part of creation matters.

And Words matters, words are needed to illuminate this.

Theology and churches have important contributions in this process.

We are used to use a religious poetic language, supplementing what is seen by natural science, technology, economy or politics.

We can contribute with other visions for the good life and the future than continuous growth in production and consumption.

We represent congregations being a part of a well-structured reliable global network.

ECEN has worked for this for years.

But ECEN can't continue in the same way as it used to.



It is a crisis, but a crisis is not only something difficult and frustrating. It can also be a positive turning point, an opportunity to rethink our mission.

Maybe we should follow the way archbishop Rowan Williams outlined, when he said: What is Christian mission? It is to try to listen to what God is up to out there – outside the walls of the churches and church-related institutions – and join in!

Maybe we should develop more alliances with secular NGO's engaged in climate and biodiversity – for instance the young climate activists in Fridays for Future.