

## **Role of churches in environmental sustainability**

“Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country” Franklin Roosevelt”

Illegal dumping in Port Elizabeth by the residents of PE has become a public health hazard for the health of the community as well as the economy of the city.

What concerns us is the fact that any vacant piece of land especially in front of the churches is used as a dumping place.

The people who are responsible belong to those very churches, and yet no one in the congregation or church leadership says anything about the matter.

Everything is dumped, including dead animals like dogs and building rubble from those who are renovating their houses.

Residents can also be seen dumping their household garbage on the sites.

There have been a number of failed initiatives by churches, which we can learn from in order to be more successful in future.

Efforts were made by a cluster of Nelson Mandela Bay church denominations to teach congregants about the threat of climate change and the need to build economies and societies based on a revitalised moral vision which includes the Biblical injunction not to “pollute the land in which you live” (Numbers 35:33).

The initiative was championed by people from various church denominations following a resolution taken by faith leaders at the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP 17 Conference in 2011.

It was launched in December 2012.

This cluster operated under the programme called “Eco-Congregations” where the Christian community in the NMB could engage on environmental issues such as food security, waste management and energy saving to ensure a sustainable metro.

In addition, it taught that climate change challenges all Christians to cherish the earth and all that is in it.

### **Training**

Training was an essential part of the program and this was conducted at Shamwari, in an environmentally friendly setting.

Unfortunately, there was insufficient support from the church leadership of the metro at the time. The people who were inspired to launch the initiative abandoned it as, without the support, they could not make a difference.

The lesson is that not all leaders accept new innovations unless they have initiated them themselves

What we need is church leaders who understand the concept of 360 degrees leadership.

### **Gardening**

One of the interventions identified was that of urban gardening to ensure food security.

Some churches went as far as partnering with government departments in the training of the congregations on how to start home gardens, but the initiative was not sustained.

Volunteerism is powerful, but it can only go so far. People need to be paid, and they need resources if a project is to grow and be sustainable.

### **Tree planting**

Trees were donated by Parmalat, a private company. Some churches received as many as ten trees. But, when we followed up on them, only a few trees were still in existence. They did not provide shade.

The recipient congregations were not organised enough to assign watering duties to a member or members.

As a result, there are no trees to provide shade, food or a shelter for birds – all of which are Biblical.

### **Recycling**

Domes for collecting paper to recycle were donated for churches to collect newspapers, old newsletters and other recyclable paper. There were regular collections.

Unfortunately, the churches failed to secure the domes and vandals set some of them alight, leading to the project being abandoned.

### **A healthy metro**

The 1982 Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion states: “Health promotion is the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health.

“To reach a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, an individual or group must be able to identify and to realize aspirations, to satisfy needs, and to change or cope with the environment.

“Health is, therefore, seen as a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living.

“Health is a positive concept emphasizing social and personal resources, as well as physical capacities. Therefore, health promotion is not just the responsibility of the health sector, but goes beyond healthy life-styles to well-being”.

Clearly, there is a role for the church in health promotion. Which organisation is better equipped to help residents to strive towards a state of “well-being” and all that entails both physically and spiritually?

### **The environment**

Environmental determinants of health include all the physical, chemical, and biological factors external to a person, and all the related factors impacting behaviours (including clean air and water, energy saving healthy workplaces, safe houses, community spaces and roads and managing climate change) – targeted towards preventing disease and creating health-supportive environment.

Churches are the voices of the residents who have been denied a healthy environment by uncaring politicians and municipal officials. Many of those politicians and officials are members of congregations. They should be held accountable.

### **Taking strain off the clinics**

Many other opportunities have been lost. They include educating our communities about other public health issues such as eating habits, and the benefit of organic foods in particular. Healthy eating helps prevent chronic medical conditions like diabetes, cancer, high blood pressure, osteoporosis and heart disease.

Healthy eating – which should be promoted in all congregations – would relieve the strain on clinic staff who would have the time and resources to provide better care to the congregants of Nelson Mandela Bay.

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