



Our Bioregion, Our Sacred Home

“We know that . . . we are now demanding more than [the earth] is able to provide. Science confirms what we already know: our human footprint is changing the face of the earth and because we come from the earth, it is changing us too. We are engaged in the process of destroying our very being. If we cannot live in harmony with the earth, we will not live in harmony with one another.”

—Anglican Communion Environmental Network

Tucked on the Western edge of the continent, the Diocese of Olympia is a place Episcopalians not only inhabit: We call it *home*.

For many of us, it is home because of its incomparable natural beauty. Many among us would say that we love these mountains, these waters, these islands, these lush fields; we find God here. The Olympic Rainforest with its giant trees is possessed of perhaps the most exquisite silence in the continental United States. The San Juan Islands and even deep into urban Puget Sound are places where you can see orca whales and even hear their exhalations. The Skagit Valley's blooms are matched only by the seasonal calls of the great flocks of migrating birds. And the salmon are the iconic and endangered centerpiece of our Salish Sea and coastal ecosystems. We inhabit the phrase "God's creation is at the heart of my spirituality."

Nearly 100 Episcopal congregations are spread over 24,742 square miles. Our communities are rural and urban. Some of our worshiping communities are perched on islands. Some are edged by farmland. Some are tucked into mountain ranges. Some sit on the edge of the vast Pacific. And many are situated in growing cities, suburbs, and the metropolitan corridor stretching from the Oregon border to the Canadian border.

But our Episcopal communities are not only *situated in* their "settings"; our parishes *inhabit* their places and are part of the family of life—human, animal, plant. When our home and kin are diminished, we are diminished.

Within the lifetimes of many Episcopalians, Western Washington has been transformed. Within a very short time we have seen troubling changes to our home. And the changes are not small. A cascade of impacts began generations ago with overharvesting and unchecked development. Succeeding generations proceeded with immorally unregulated pollution loads into air, land, and water. Plummeting fish populations, eroded mountainsides, and unnecessary flooding in areas in which building should never have taken place have taken their toll.

As our science advances, we continue to learn of the complex interweaving in the skein of life around us. This connectedness inspires awe in how this vast Creation functions.

Salmon returning to spawn and dying in far upriver tributaries are the conveyors of vitally important nitrogenous nutrients from ocean to forest ecosystem. Their decaying, post-spawning bodies not only feed their young fry by supporting communities of stream invertebrates, but they also are carried by bears and other predators far from the water, and eventually feed the ground that nurtures the entire forest ecosystem. Of the eight species of salmon, trout, and char that spawn in and utilize the watersheds and nearshore habitat of Puget Sound, four species are now listed as threatened. And their numbers continue to decline from multiple causes, primarily tied to human activity. Salmon are at the heart of the indigenous Native American cultures that have inhabited this Northwest coastal area for more than 20,000 years. For the Native groups here before western colonization, the richness of this land was such that there was no need to move dwellings seasonally. All was provided by nature's abundance, and this was respected and honored in cultural traditions and practices.

But capping off generations of abuse and overuse of the gifts God graced us with in this place we call home; we are now experiencing changes that cannot be ignored or hidden or denied.

Climate change has become climate *crisis*. We can no longer presume continuity in the resources we took for granted in this natural resource-based economy.

For those following the science, many of the changes we are experiencing now were predicted to come our way in 2050 or later. What many thought was a far-away possibility has become a visceral and very present reality. For example, over only the last few short years, virtually every congregation in our Diocese has been exposed to wildfire smoke. Inhabitants of Western Washington now have what was unthinkable only a few years ago: a "smoke season." We breathe smoke from fires to the north in British Columbia; from the east in the Cascades and beyond; and from Oregon and California to the south.

Many of our congregations have been in flood zones and mudslides. Coastal

communities dependent on fishing have seen ocean warming and ocean acidification result in decreased abundance of fish, mass die-offs of fish and marine birds from lack of food or low dissolved oxygen, inability of oyster larvae to develop shells, and changes in species composition in marine ecosystems.

In many of our communities, the individuals and families least able to withstand loss—those without adequate financial savings and the ability to move if needed—have paid the price with their lives.

Beginning in the early 1990s, Episcopalians and other Christians in Western Washington joined forces to ask questions such as *What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus Christ in these times of environmental decline?* and *How does our faith tradition inform and empower us?* These early efforts focused on networking, resources for congregational education and worship, and tools for advocacy, joining with others who cared about this web of issues.

But 2022 is a long way from 1992. Once again, the Church is called to ask vital questions about our role, our place, and our ministry within the communities we serve. And once again, the Diocese of Olympia has a unique role to play and special gifts to offer as we live faithfully in the world we are called to serve.