

JUST FAITH AND ACTION:

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The right to water

We need to make no mistake about it. The United States is pressing, aggressively and arrogantly, an economic agenda that is indifferent to the needs and hopes of much of the rest of the world.

The seventh Millennium Development Goal says simply: Ensure environmental sustainability.

The idea here is to connect the concept of sustainable development (there's a lot of quibbling about what that means precisely, but you get the idea) with the protection of environmental resources. How, in short, can we address the basic needs of humanity and still respect the integrity of creation?

One of the indicators for this goal has to do with how much forest remains. Deforestation is a critical issue when wood is the mainstay of a family's fuel. It's also in heavy demand worldwide for other purposes – fine furniture is one – which explains why Liberia's Charles Taylor and the rebels in the eastern Congo earned so much money on the international market through timber sales. The United States, to say the least, has not been at the forefront of forestry protection, domestically or abroad, and cutting down trees as a security precaution along President Bush's route during his 2003 visit to Uganda is not the kind of symbolic gesture one would like to see. The protection of biological diversity is another indicator that finds us lacking. The push to exempt our military from laws protecting endangered species is more than just symbolism. As for carbon dioxide emissions – another indicator – the Bush administration refuses to control them in domestic legislation and international agreements over global warming.

The target to which I am especially drawn has to do with safe drinking water, reducing by half the proportion of people without access, by 2015. And this – as in all the above indicators – is where the economic agenda comes in. If we begin with the premise that individuals should have the "freedom" to do what they want, unencumbered by government regulation and community constraints, then safe water might rightly be addressed through what is called water privatization. That scheme, encouraged by the World Bank, the IMF and the United States, declares water to be a commodity to be owned and sold for profit, an economic entity to which a value is attached. If, on the other hand, we begin with the premise that a life of dignity emerges from a belief that the basic needs of people are to be met by a community committed to the welfare of all of its people, then water and food and shelter are seen as a right, to be embraced and advanced. What happens to the poor and those who live in rural areas if businesses with water as the commodity neglect them in the interest of profit? New Orleans and Ghana have something in common here.

We as people of faith have not sufficiently engaged in the policies of our nation to challenge the view that whatever one can secure for oneself, to that we individually are entitled. That view plays itself out when our government considers it more important to "privatize" than to ensure inclusive access to that which gives life; or when it demands that Africans accept the "right" of multinational corporations to patent seeds that Africans have used for generations. Our self-serving agenda as a nation conflicts with our faith's vision of community and the common good. There is a calling here for us.

*Yours faithfully,
Leon Spencer*

This is the seventh in a series of reflections on the Millennium Development Goals originally prepared for the Cambridge Consultation at the 2003 General Convention of the Episcopal Church.

If there are others you would like us to send these reflections to, please pass their names and addresses on to us. Alternatively, if these reflections are unhelpful, just let us know and we'll remove you from our list.

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