

Eleventh Commandment Fellowship

The Eleventh Commandment Fellowship (1980-1988) played a significant role in the creation of a viable national movement of environmental activists working from within the mainstream American Christian churches during the late twentieth century. The fellowship was also successful in fostering awareness and implementation of an ethic of ecology that was firmly rooted in traditional Christian teachings and doctrine.

The group derives its name from a 1979 article by Vincent Rossi, "The Eleventh Commandment: Toward an Ethic of Ecology." Rossi was the director general of the Holy Order of MANS, an independent Christian service and teaching order that had been founded in 1968 in San Francisco. The order practiced a theosophical and Rosicrucian based system of initiatory spirituality and proclaimed the dawning of an age of spiritual enlightenment. Group members took traditional monastic vows, observed daily periods of meditation and prayer, celebrated cyclical festivals such as winter solstice and the full moons, and lived in common in over 46 centers throughout the United States and Europe. In the wake of the Jonestown mass suicides, the group moved away from its esoteric and theosophical origins toward a more mainstream Christian identity. Rossi's article in the order's new journal, *Epiphany*, was an attempt to communicate the order's vision of an ecological lifestyle to a mainstream Christian audience.

The article indicted American materialism and consumerism for the wholesale desecration of the earth. Rossi declared that the dire condition of the earth's bio-system called for a profound alteration of human values and goals, a revolution of consciousness that would reawaken humanity to the presence of the divine throughout the natural world.

Toward this end, he proclaimed an eleventh commandment: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof: Thou shall not despoil the earth, nor destroy the life thereon."

Rossi also issued a call for environmental action that included education concerning the ecological crisis, the use of appropriate technologies, the elimination of personal actions harmful to the environment, and the formation of environmental action groups. In 1980, The Eleventh Commandment Fellowship was organized to carry out this action plan. Between 1980 and 1984, the fellowship promoted a broad, ecumenical approach to educating Christians about the ecological crisis. It organized local chapters in major cities throughout the country, set up food cooperatives, planted community organic gardens, and convened public educational meetings. The fellowship's national office published a newsletter, sponsored annual Earth Stewardship symposia in the San Francisco Bay Area, and organized large-scale conferences in retreat facilities nationwide. The fellowship's symposia and conferences were open to the general public and attracted members of diverse environmental groups and churches.

The most significant of the fellowship's conferences was the North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology (NACCE). This large-scale ecumenical conference of environmental activists included, among others, the AuSable Institute, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, the eco-justice working group of the National Council of Churches, and the Threshold Foundation. Despite major disagreements during planning meetings in 1986 over the meaning of Christianity and the church's relationship to the broader environmental movement--in particular Wiccans and secular ecologists, enough agreement was reached to schedule a major conference.

Over five hundred people representing every major Christian denomination in North America attended the NACCE in North Webster, Indiana, in August 1987. The stated purpose of the conference was to stimulate a Christian response to the global ecological crisis. The conference's 63 sponsoring organizations represented a broad cross-section of secular and religious organizations. Its working document stated the conferees' belief that God was calling humanity to: 1) preserve the earth's diverse life forms; 2) create an ecologically sustainable economy; 3) overcome the despoliation of nature wherever it was occurring.

In the aftermath of deep divisions between moderate and conservative Christian groups, a faction of disgruntled NACCE members formed the North American Conference on *Religion* and Ecology (NACRE) to foster an eco-spirituality that was open to interfaith cooperation on ecological issues. The North American Conference on *Christianity* and Ecology (NACCE) rejected this splinter group and claimed that the NACRE's creation-centered spirituality substituted evolution for repentance and was anti-Christian in nature and intent. By 1990, the Eleventh Commandment Fellowship had merged into NAACE. Together with the Holy Order of MANS' successor organization, Christ the Savior Brotherhood, NAACE continued to organize local and regional conferences on Christian ecology during the 1990s, but from a more exclusivist, anti-modern, and apocalyptic perspective.

During its life span, the Eleventh Commandment Fellowship's writings, workshops, and conferences helped organize a diverse array of regional and local religious/ecological groups into a nationally coordinated movement. It also helped mainstream Christians to formulate a response to Lynn White's charge (in a 1966 address

to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences) that "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" for the ecological crisis.

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Further Reading

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White, Lynn, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." *Science*, 155 (1967), 1203-1207.