

OCICE: Twenty Years of Environmental Ministry

The beginning of the *Orange County Interfaith Coalition for the Environment* was very much like a ship being launched on a sea of troubled water, meaning a voyage of discovery through the issues and concerns of a world beset with environmental and climactic degradation being caused by human beings.

The Green Networking Group, 1995

Locally, it came out of the minds and hearts of several people, who in 1995, were a committee within a California Orange County group called, *Green Networking*, that focused its concerns on environmental issues that were warning signs of a future collapse of the Earth's ecosystems, and of the ability of the Earth to sustain life in the future. Its function was to network with other groups that had the same concerns and to form a coalition of like-minded environmentally astute and active members. It also came from a 1992 appeal from *The Union of Concerned Scientists* to all the world's religions saying that "The environmental problems we face are so serious and severe that we need the help of the religious community, as these are moral issues".

This was an awakening period in America and elsewhere where many people were really beginning to see the results of the human destruction of nature and its life systems by corporate and global money interests in pursuing their ambition for profit and power at the expense of the natural world, and from activities of ignorance which were destructive to the environment. *Green Networking* had been a call to arms, hands and minds to come together in defense of our Earth, and from it, *OCICE* would be formed.

Birth of OCICE

In 1996, *Green Networking* in Orange County ceased to be, and the three individuals from the past *Green Networking* committee, Kathryn Hansen, Margaret Henke and Brian Christofferson felt a moral and ethical responsibility to create another Orange County organization dedicated to informing an uninformed public of the environmental issues taking place in their own communities and the world at large. They determined to call this new group, *The Orange County Interfaith Coalition for the Environment—OCICE*, and to seek non-profit status as an environmental organization of interfaith people who were dedicated to educating and inspiring people to become responsible stewards of creation and to be active in this cause. The time had come for us to take action for the future preservation of the planet and all life systems being threatened. A few others joined *OCICE* and a committee was then formed that planned the first *OCICE* Conference, and entitled it, *Caring for Creation*.

If one looks at the backdrop of this time period, we need only go back several years from the *Green Networking* days to a major global paradigm shift with the fall of the Berlin Wall which began with the November 9, 1989, East German announcement that East Germans and West Germans were free to visit one another and to cross the barrier gates of the Berlin Wall. Soon, euphoric people began chipping away parts of the wall that had stood in their way for so long, and finally, under German reunification

agreements the Berlin Wall was totally demolished by industrial equipment between 1990 and 1992. Entrenched ways had begun to shift and the world was changing and old ways of exclusion and darkness were opening up for a call to a new generation of global interaction and coexistence.

Another aspect of shift took place in December 1991, with the amazing disintegration of the Soviet Union into fifteen separate countries. People were more accessible to one another—to different cultures, traditions and lifestyles. The flow of migration began with freedom to travel and experience life in other regions of the globe. They were now linked into the information age of the internet and the socio-political and environmental issues of the day. Cultures and religions of the world were mixing more than ever before, and both information and misinformation were available 24 / 7 with the news media that was now linking global activities and news to an international stream of images and reporting. Though cell phones were a few years away yet, human beings were being barraged with information day and night through their television sets and computers, and we were learning more about global activity and the endangerment to Nature's life systems.

By the time *OCICE* had formed, there were already a number of scientifically based ecology groups and organizations eager to inform and inspire the general citizenry of the damage being done locally and globally to Nature, and how all of these practices would come home to roost by destroying the very biosphere and ecosystems needed for survival. *OCICE* was one of the few interfaith environmental organizations to exist in Southern California, so it was with a great sense of purpose that it began to reach out through churches, synagogues, mosques and temples to religious leaders to take an active part in environmental stewardship and to follow the precepts of their own holy books to take care of God's Creation.

Every ship has a launching place, and for *OCICE*, it was Tustin, California, and monthly member meetings were held and still are held at Aldersgate United Methodist Church. The committee of *OCICE* soon became a board and attracted others in to be part of a committee. With monthly meetings, reports and constant planning, *OCICE* has sailed through many issues and faced gratitude, criticism and sometimes hostility from those who refute science and see environmentalism as a waste of time. But through the years, *OCICE* produced a *Caring for Creation Conference* from 1998 until 2010, and began a yearly *Faith Leaders' Luncheon* in 2010, that still takes place each May. It has introduced some prominent and brilliant speakers on ecology and spirituality to those who have attended conferences and workshops; it has held classes and workshops related to living a mindful and environmentally wise lifestyle, done ceaseless networking with other groups and organizations to stretch its outreach and to continue its own learning experience, and it has participated in numerous events and partnered with different organizations as well. All of this work has been for the greater good of educating and expanding awareness of the needs of our Earth and all its inhabitants. In short, *OCICE* continues its pursuit to raise global consciousness as more people become enlightened as to the sacredness of all life and the Oneness of this interconnected web. The *OCICE* mission statement reflects this intent:

The Orange County Interfaith Coalition for the Environment educates, raises awareness and empowers people to actively protect and preserve Creation through responsible stewardship.

Early Conferences and Programs

The First Conference of *OCICE* reflected the ecumenical flow of its membership and participants as the first years were mainly made up of catholic and protestant denominations with some new thought individuals. As some Buddhists, Muslims, and Jews attended our meetings, we did have interfaith input, but our venues for all of the *Caring for Creation Conferences* were at Christian churches. Later, when we began our *Faith Leaders' Luncheons*, the venues were of other faith traditions such as Sikh, Jain, Muslim, Buddhist and Latter Day Saints. We had by then incorporated many more people from other religious traditions to make these venues possible.

Along the journey, *OCICE* created and had many varied experiences through programs, classes and events it either sponsored, co-sponsored, or participated in. The main focus for a number of years was the *Caring for Creation Conference* that began in 1998, at St. Mark Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, Ca. The speaker was the Rev. Canon Peter Kreitler, Episcopal Priest, director and founder of Earth Service, Inc. The Episcopal Dioceses of Los Angeles conferred upon him the title of "Minister of the Environment," and this title was quite possibly the reason why so many mainstream churches in Orange County came to name their groups working on environmental issues "Earth Ministries."

The initial thrust of the first conferences was to open the eyes of those attending as to the severity of damage and destruction done to Nature by human beings, and the price we all would be paying as a result. This eye-opening by first Rev. Kreitler, and then by activist environmentalist, actor Ed Begley, Jr. in the 1999 conference brought forth many significant ways in which the ecosystems of Earth were being attacked through abuse, neglect, and mindless plundering of the planet's resources without concern for the consequences of so doing. At the time, Ed Begley was living such a simplified lifestyle, mindful of over-consumption and the waste that was building up in landfills everywhere, that he inspired attendees to look at their daily habits and purchases and to recognize that they could make a difference to the planet by their personal choices. His topic was, *Live Simply that Others may Simply Live*. Both speakers put the issues of choice into the laps of the public in that each of us has a major impact on what the future of life on Earth will or will not be.

In 2000, Dr. Calvin De Witt, with the Evangelical Environmental Network, and Professor of Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, broke into the mindset at the conference that evangelicals are not in on "Caring for Creation", citing that biblical text commands us to be stewards of the Earth, and to protect and defend what God has created. He considered it sacrilege to turn one's back on Nature as if it were merely a playing field for the soul until God calls the righteous back home. It's up to all of us to recognize that Creation comes from the hand of God, and to not do so is antithetical to God's Will.

Growing Intensity

The tone and intensity of the conferences from 2001 through 2010 grew as information and ecological concerns and awareness was growing within the public domain. In 2002, Julia Butterfly Hill was guest speaker. She had become known for her historic protest against the clear-cutting of ancient redwoods and spending 738 days up in a 1,000 year-old redwood tree, she named Luna. Her book entitled, *The Legacy of Luna*, is an account of this transitional period in Julia's life where she came to know Luna as a friend with whom she had learned to communicate. She protested to save the magnificent redwoods from being cut down, and ended her stay within the branches of Luna by having gained an awareness of the deep sacredness of trees and all life forms. Hers was a lesson we needed to hear as we continually co-habitate with the beings of Nature. The message was that each life is sacred, and that all life is conscious.

Concerns for the future of the planet and the sustainability of life continued to be the focal point of each speaker to follow. In 2003, Rabbi Daniel Swartz, Associate Director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, called for world faith groups to join together to reclaim a healthy and productive planet through acts of environmental and social justice. In 2004, Duane Elgin, author, educator and science-based activist, spoke to his audience about social choices for a more promising future, using his book, *Promises Ahead*, to stir the audience to thoughts of personal activism within their own lives. His was a thrust into a positive future through healing and productive action.

The Shift in Human Consciousness

The 2005 and 2006 conferences strongly endorsed social, political and environmental action and a commitment to a *Shift* in human consciousness to unite people of the world to what the great cultural historian, Father Thomas Berry, would call *The Great Work*. We have to take personal responsibility to turn the devastation of the Earth around, and to be major players in healing the ills between peoples of the world and the warring class against Nature. Andrew Harvey, poet, writer and mystic spoke of the spiritual essence of all life and awakening a sleeping humanity to recognize this reality. He used his book, *Seven Laws of Sacred Activism*, to give a step-by-step approach to turn things around and bring about a transformation in human consciousness.

Likewise, Rev. Dr. Matthew Fox, famed Episcopal priest and enlightened theologian, shared his views dynamically in what it will take for us to have a *Sustainable Earth, Sustainable Lives*—by *Becoming Spiritual Warriors on the Earth's Behalf*. This was the title and direction of his talk. He spoke of radically new ways in which to meet the issues of global warming and injustice through a committed humanity to be One with all people and all creatures, and the Earth herself. He proclaimed that Earth is our mother, and that we, the children need Her, need each other. It all goes together for the sake of survival. Dr. Fox' message of the *Cosmic Christ* in each of us emphasized the word ALL.

Each and every conference held by OCICE was educational, inspiring and action driven. This was so important to get the word out to people about what was going on with environmental issues throughout the world and the bringing together of people of

many world faith communities to be active stewards for the Earth. The year 2006 became a turning point for many with the threat of Global Warming playing more and more on the marquee of our daily lives. The resounding message of environmentalists and scientists about the reality of Climate Change came into the public domain through Al Gore's 2006 film, *An Inconvenient Truth*. From that time on, OCICE made the Climate Crisis its prime topic and issue to work on. And in 2008, the speaker at the *Caring for Creation Conference* was Bill McKibben, environmental activist, who would become heralded as the leader of the 350 Movement to lower CO2 emissions in the atmosphere from 400 ppm to 350 ppm. Lowering emissions to the 350 level would make it possible to slow the deleterious affects of atmospheric carbon and Global Warming. Bill McKibben also emphasized the need to turn to clean energy alternatives and to stop the dependence on fossil fuel and the oil industry to limit the Green House effect carbon emissions are having on our atmosphere. His warning of major climactic catastrophe for the future seems to be borne out in the rise of sea levels, unseasonable temperatures, droughts, hurricanes, floods and the melting of the glacial ice caps being experienced in different parts of the world.

All the environmental issues facing life on Earth became dwarfed by the Climate Crisis which scientists now think is happening much faster than originally believed. OCICE has been stirred to do as much as possible to inform the public of the quickly moving process of Climate Change and its massive threat to life, and to what we humans can do about it. At the conferences during the years, all the workshops held in the morning and afternoon related to a change in human behavior. Some of the workshops were on topics such as:

- *Big Oil and the Petroleum Industry*
- *CO2 Emissions and Pollution*
- *Corporate Rule and Devastation to the Environment*
- *Responding to Energy Vulnerability*
- *Protecting Current and Future Generations*
- *Exposure to Toxic Chemicals*
- *Pollution of the Air, Land and Oceans*
- *The Coal Companies and Mountain Top Removal*
- *Ethical Consumption*
- *Saving the World While You Spend*
- *Plastics and their Alternatives*
- *Habitat destruction and Urban Sprawl*
- *The Growing List of Animal and Plant Extinctions*
- *Food Choices and GMO's*
- *Deforestation and the Rain Forest*
- *A Vegetarian or Vegan Choice*
- *Earth Justice and Animal Rights*
- *Awakening to Oneness*
- *Humans and Animals in World Religions*
- *The Dangers of Fracking*
- *Results of Global Warming (The Green House Effect) etc.*

OCICE came to recognize that every topic of ecological concern it came up with was in one way or another connected to the mass problem we currently face of “Global Warming and the Crisis in Climate Change.” This is a moral and ethical issue that has mushroomed from thousands of human activities that have been detrimental to the sustainability of life on Earth, and that we are now faced with trying to overcome. As a result of seeing this clearly and also recognizing that though a conference format for OCICE had been appropriate for numerous years, it had become time to account for some of the Green activities of our interfaith communities in Orange County and to see what their places of worship were doing to Green their environments. How far had people from faith communities come in learning good ecological practices to offset the prior unhealthy choices they had been making?

Luncheons and Awards

Our next project after the conferences was to begin a *Faith Leaders’ Luncheon* to be given yearly by OCICE, specifically aimed at recognizing local faith communities which had made major environmental efforts to reflect Green practices at their houses of worship, and to also recognize the efforts of religious leaders who were carrying the message to their congregations of *Being Good Stewards of the Earth*. OCICE has been trying to educate faith leaders and lay leaders in all faith communities about the importance of the environmental crisis we are facing, and to highlight all the positive environmental actions that have taken place in addressing this at worship center sites.

We decided to give a *Steward of Creation* award to houses of worship that have presented themselves as making dramatic changes in their practices and have stopped using Styrofoam products, toxic chemicals, and have gone to drought-tolerant landscaping, solar panels, and have cut back on water consumption and waste, etc. OCICE’s mission has always been to educate and inspire healthy changes that will benefit the environment and be a model of healthy ecology for others to follow.

In 2010, our first *Faith Leaders’ Luncheon* was held at the Sikh Temple in Costa Mesa, and the guest speaker was Rev. Peter Kreidler. The *Steward of Creation* award went to two congregations at this time. The next *Faith Leader’s Luncheon* in 2011, was held at the Shinnyo-En Buddhist Temple in Brea, and Rev. Canon Sally Bingham, an Episcopal priest and founder of the *Regeneration Project*, and *Interfaith Power and Light*, was our speaker. The *Steward of Creation* award went to the Center for Spiritual Living in Seal Beach.

From 2012 – 2015, the *Faith Leaders’ Luncheon* venues were Sukyo Mahikari Center for Spiritual Development in Rancho Santa Margarita, the Islamic Center in Irvine, the Jain Community Center in Buena Park, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Irvine. The *Steward of Creation* awards went to Community United Methodist Church in Costa Mesa, the Sisters of St. Joseph in Orange, Unity of Tustin in Tustin, Brea Congregational United Church of Christ in Brea, and Neighborhood Congregational Church in Laguna Beach.

In 2013, OCICE along with Rev. Canon Peter Kreidler, decided to add an *Earth Day Sermon Award* that was a financial gift to be given to the worship center or congregation

of the winning sermon chosen by a panel and Rev. Kreitler. OCICE again thought this would encourage pastors and religious leaders to offer their people words of concern about the sacredness of the global environment and the human need to take care of creation. Recipients of the *Earth Day Sermon Award* have been Rev. Dr. Carolyn Bohler of Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Tustin; Rev. Sara Halverson of Fairview Community Church in Costa Mesa; Rev. Jeanyne Sletton of the Brea UCC; and three sermon awards in 2015 to Marilyn Gottschall, Ph.D, emeritus professor of Whittier College, and member of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Long Beach; Rev. Andrew Barnett, Bishop's Chair for Environmental Studies and Food Justice, Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles; and Dr. Tim Murphy from Progressive Christians Uniting, St. Mark Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach.

The *Faith Leaders' Luncheons* also had other prominent and impactful speakers such as Chris Roth, from *Climate Reality Project*, who gave a power point presentation on *Global Climate Change, Our Urgent Challenge*, in 2013, and Dr. John Cobb, professor emeritus of the Claremont School of Theology, and lifelong environmentalist and organizer of the huge worldwide conference, *Toward an Ecological Civilization*, held in Claremont in June of 2015. Each and every speaker and individual or worship center involved in the *Faith Leaders' Luncheons* reflected a deep concern for the state of our Earth and the need for a global unification focused on environmental justice and the peaceful cohabitation among all people as they care for each other and creation.

Though the *Caring for Creation Conferences* and the *Faith Leaders' Luncheons* have been the main offerings to the public and interfaith communities in Orange County, there have been so many ways in which OCICE, under the committed leadership of Margaret Henke, and Sherri Loveland, has worked to inform and inspire people to take part in efforts to create a sustainable world in which there is a future for generations to come. We have offered classes, shown films, publicized events on our website of our own and other environmental groups, and participated in outside events with booths and activities to draw people into OCICE and into the awareness of the global crises all life faces as our Earth heats up.

From the early days of OCICE, classes at homes and religious centers have been given by OCICE board members and leadership such as *How to Start Your Own Earth Ministry*, aimed at churches and spiritual centers; *Toxic Chemicals and Safe Alternatives for the Home*; *Clean Energy and Transportation*; and *The Web of Life*, to name a few. OCICE has shown films such as *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Renewal*, *Forks over Knives*, *Chasing Ice*, and more.

We have also hosted other programs during the years such as a *Healthy Earth Event*, a *Solar Nights* program and energy and water symposiums. We have also incorporated indigenous people into our programs and their sacred practices as we sponsored an *Earth Celebration* ceremony at each of our *Caring for Creation Conferences*, with music, rituals, dance and sacred items from Nature we would all place upon an altar that honored the earth. We also hosted two *Pachamama Symposiums* that reflected the sacred in Nature and the indigenous lifestyles that plan ahead for the future of the next seven generations. We also participate in Earth Day events and programs and sponsor our own *Prayer Vigil for the Earth* at a board member's home.

Several times we have partnered with other groups to sponsor events like, *Bike the Back Bay*, hikes, coastal clean-ups or tree plantings. OCICE has participated numerous times in hosting a booth at events such as *A Walk for Hope*, *International Day* at Soka University or UCI. We have had a booth present with information of OCICE and our cards at community and county functions and events, been present at the *Global Summit* and participated in the *Great American Write-In*. These adventures have been many and varied, but they all have the character of service to life and a hope for a future of change. We have also actively protested in climate rallies and marches, including the *Forward On Climate Rally*, held in Los Angeles to stop the Keystone pipeline, which some of the participants took all the way to Washington D.C.

Largest Event to Date

Our largest event took place in 2009, when we hosted an *International Day of Climate Action* that supported Bill McKibben's call to keep our CO2 emissions down to 350, and the numbers of 350 became the primary symbol of the *Climate Change Movement*. At this event, three hundred fifty of us formed a huge 350 and had a photo taken from the air. We partnered for this day with the *Sierra Club*, *Earth Resource Foundation*, and the UN Association here in Orange County, and 350.org. That day we also thanked the mayor of Huntington Beach for signing on to the *Climate Protection Act*, which we had sent out to mayors and clergy in Orange County cities to sign. Related to the *Climate Change Movement*, we partnered with the *United Religions Initiative* and hosted a special screening at Chapman University with the director of *How to Boil a Frog*. The intended metaphor of the film was to show the slow-but-sure warming that leads to death and destruction.

Coming to the close of 2015, OCICE has significantly grown since the early days of the late 90's and has become recognized for its journey through these rough environmentally challenging seas. We have reached out to communities throughout Orange County and believe we have made a difference in directing people's attention to the reality of the global environmental crises we face today and in the future. As lead representative of OCICE, Margaret Henke has received numerous awards and recognition for her work and the efforts of the people of OCICE. In 2009, OCICE received an award from the *Parliament of the World's Religions* for its efforts to bring about peaceful coexistence among faith communities and partnering in an effort to work for global environmental sustainability. Some of the OCICE board members also attended the *Parliament of the World's Religions Conference* in Salt Lake October 2015.

Reason for Hope

Dr. Jane Goodall, primatologist and scientist, has said that there is *Reason for Hope* that we humans will one day find our way to a global harmonious awareness of the sacred web of life. What it takes, we do not know, but there are now many organizations and groups sailing through the troubled waters of these times--a regular regatta, and with organizations and groups such as OCICE at the helm of a peaceful environmental movement to repair and restore the Earth, we continue to work for the benefit of sustainable life on this sacred planet.

Submitted by Rev. Susan Chamberlain, Ph.D., board member --OCICE

