

STRATEGIES FOR THE CHURCH IN THE ENERGY CRISIS

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There is still some debate among the American people over the reality of the energy crisis. Is the energy problem real enough and serious enough to be called a crisis?

Sociologist Pitrikim Sorokin once observed that a crisis develops when an old idea exhausts itself and society seeks to re-orient itself around a new idea. If we accept Professor Sorokin's definition, then we are indeed facing an energy crisis.(1)

Whatever our energy future--whether we take the "soft" or "hard" path, whether we emphasize renewable or non-renewable resources--it is becoming more evident to all that the net result will be a curtailment of our energy intensive life style at least for the next decade or two. We have heard the figures many times--the United States with 5.8% of the world's people consumes 33% of the world's commercial energy. It does not take much arithmetic to figure that this level cannot be maintained on a world-wide scale. The diminishing availability and increasing cost of energy will demand of us a drastic alteration in the energy intensive life style to which this generation of affluent North Americans has become accustomed. In Sorokin's terms, the old idea of a consumption oriented, energy intensive life style is about to exhaust itself and our society will need to re-orient itself around a new idea, a new set of values and a new life style. This, at least, is my outlook and is the assumption upon which this address is based.

Professor Shinn concluded his presentation in the Lenten Issue, 1981, Journal for Preachers with the question: How does change take place in a society? This is the point at which I want to begin. More specifically, I want to ask: What is the role or responsibility of the church in assisting this change or re-orientation? As some of you might expect from a preacher, I am going to consider three roles or areas of responsibility. Let me assure you these three were not chosen for homiletical reasons. They were suggested by the work of Don Shriver and Karl Ostrom in the Urban Policy Study which they conducted in the Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill area and is described in their book, Is There Hope for the City? I will be referring to specific findings of this study as we go along.(2)

They were interested in detecting the "ethical marks of the church" or how a church goes about developing and nourishing ethically mature members; i.e. members whose attitudes reflect "the core ethical dispositions of the Judeo-Christian tradition."(3) They detected three dimensions or facets of church life which were common to the experience of these ethically mature church members: 1) These people were members of a church which lifted up public issues for theological reflection and discussion, 2) these people were members of a fellowship--a group of people whom they trusted and upon whom they could count for support, and 3) these people were members of a church which helped them move from discussion to action in their personal and public lives. They concluded that these three characteristics are facets of a single process and work together to form what might be called the "triangle" of the church's ministry in society. It takes all three legs to make a triangle. These three facets of church life suggest three areas of responsibility and

therefore three strategy areas for the church as it seeks to relate to the energy crisis: a theological responsibility, a pastoral responsibility, and a political responsibility.

The Urban Policy Study was primarily interested in what facets of church life led to changes in attitudes toward openness to people of other races and concern for the public good. I think the findings are also valid for our interest in assessing the role of the church in supporting a change of attitude and life style in regard to energy issues.

The church has a theological responsibility. The church has a responsibility for lifting up energy issues for theological reflection and discussion. John Leith has defined theology in its broadest sense as "critical reflection about the meaning of human existence and about the nature of the universe."⁽⁴⁾ This suggests that the theological responsibility of the church involves critical reflection. The energy situation we are facing and the various responses and solutions being proposed must be analyzed and evaluated in light of our understanding of the nature of the universe, of human nature and of God's will and purpose for both. The same kind of debate and reflection must go on at every level of the church's life, especially in the local church. In sermons, in church school classes, in special retreats, seminars and discussion groups; the various energy related issues need to be raised and they need to be discussed in the light of relevant theological issues such as justice, mercy, obedience to God, the stewardship of God's gifts and the reality of divine judgment.

Those congregations which include or relate to persons involved in energy research and energy policy formulation have a special responsibility to help them develop theological and ethical skills that are commensurate with their technical skills. This work on the congregational level should be supported and supplemented with resources and additional events provided by presbyteries, synods, church colleges, seminaries and the Mission Board. Wherever we are, we have the responsibility to use all the resources, skills and occasions available to enable church members to be aware of the theological implications of energy issues and to develop the analytical skills needed to accurately and faithfully evaluate them. We cannot wait until all the technical issues have been decided before we raise the theological questions about energy policy.

Theological reflection is concerned not only with analyzing and evaluating society. A second concern involves assisting society in interpreting and nourishing values which give meaning to life. Don Shriver has written: "To cultivate and explore meanings deep and comprehensive enough to give some sense to everything in our lives is the business of religion."⁽⁵⁾ You remember John Calvin's famous metaphor of the Bible as the spectacles which bring into clearer focus God's presence and activity in the world. In a like manner it is the function of theology to bring into clearer focus those qualities which give meaning to life.

The reality of our situation is that we are losing many of the qualities to which millions of Americans have looked for meaning. For the vast majority of our people the term "quality of life" has first and foremost to do with standard of living. I recently heard a lecture by a specialist in the history of technology who argues that the reason for the American love affair with the automobile is because the automobile provides a reinforcement and an extension of basic middle class values. It is going to be harder and harder for us to pursue the same old "American dream" while sitting in line at a service station or sitting at home in a 65 degree room, all the while spending more and more for less and less. What is left of the American dream if I can't live where I like, buy what I want, go where I please and when I

please?

The church has a responsibility to remind itself and to demonstrate to others that the meaning of life is not to be found in the abundance of our possessions. Neither is it to be found in the abundance of our gasoline, nor in the abundance of our electricity, nor in our standard of living. The thoughts of losing a standard and style of living in which we have found security and satisfaction is frightening to all of us and down-right unnerving to most. As these old marks of the "good life" change and begin to crumble, it is the church's theological responsibility and opportunity to direct us all toward values which can endure and which can sustain us. A time of cultural upheaval gives the church a unique opportunity to proclaim the good news that it is God who gives meaning and value to life.

Therefore, it is the primary theological task of the church in a time of crisis to project a vision of God and what God is doing in the world. Paul Tillich once defined the doctrine of God's providence to mean "That there is a creative and saving possibility implied in every situation which cannot be destroyed by any event."⁽⁶⁾ It is the responsibility of the church, as the people who live by our faith in God's providential care, to look for the saving and creative possibilities implied by the energy crisis and to try to describe a vision of these possibilities.

One expression of that vision has already been suggested by the World Council of Churches as a "just, participatory and sustainable society." Those adjectives are still vague because the vision is still taking shape. At present we see through a glass, darkly. But we must continue to look and seek and hope. There is no more powerful force in the world than hope. Nothing feeds hope like a vision of the possible. And there is no more important theological task for the church than the task of seeking and refining the vision of the Kingdom of God which God is establishing in our midst.

The point of this first strategy is not that we should tell everyone what they ought to think about the energy crisis. I guess all of us have long been released from any illusions we might have had about our ability to determine how a bunch of Presbyterians will think about any subject. The point made by the Urban Policy Study was that the simply raising up of public issues for discussion within the context of the community of faith stimulated the theological and ethical development of the church members. Someone once called Biblical Scholarship the best kept secret in the church because it never got out of the seminaries. Let us make sure that the theological implications of the energy issues are not likewise well-kept secrets in the church.

The second area of responsibility for the church in the energy crisis we might call pastoral. The Urban Policy Study discovered what most pastors know from experience. People generally do not make significant or lasting changes in their attitudes, values or goals without the help of other people. Satisfying relationships with a group of friends gives one the freedom and courage needed to confront new situations. People who are trying to cope with a crisis certainly need a sound theology. But they need more. They need acceptance, they need encouragement, they need support, they need nurturing, they need friends.

Norman Habel has written very helpfully about this point in the context of an analysis of the relationship between Job and his friends. Eliphaz and company come to comfort Job. But their efforts are ineffective in spite of their good intentions and their sound theology. Job's great need was for a friend, not a theologian. Job's need at the moment was not for someone to give him the orthodox argument about the justice of God but someone who would share his anguish and distress. In

Professor Habel's words: "So the rational arguments of Job's friends offer him no sustenance, no substantive means of coping with his problem. Reasoned advice is no comfort; to befriend a man rejected by God means more than explaining God's actions."(7) Job needs the true compassion of a friend.

There are many in our society who view the changes being brought on by the energy crisis as a loss that is equal in kind to Job's loss. To these people it is not sufficient for the church to outline the theological analysis and interpretation of the changes. The church has a pastoral responsibility to people facing change. The church has the responsibility to try to enter into their anguish, their feelings of insecurity and uncertainty and their feelings of rejection. The church needs to be a friend as well as a theologian to them. They need to know that the church cares about them, understands their difficulties, and will stand by them to support them as they wrestle with these changes.

Who are these people to whom the church has this pastoral responsibility? Many of them are outside the membership of the church, but many of them are church members and church officers and ministers. We are they!

Even those of us who are already convinced that a substantial change in our life style is necessary and who already know that the meaning of life is not found in the abundance of our possessions and who have already caught a glimpse of the kingdom to which God is calling us—even we have made very little actual change in our style of living. Maybe we have cut the thermostat back a few degrees and have bought a smaller automobile and have done a few other minor adjustments. But few of us have begun to change to the full extent of either our knowledge or our conviction.

We know how difficult it is to make substantial changes. It is difficult to go against the stream. It is difficult to live at a level with a style and by a set of values which are greatly different from our neighbors and friends. The values and expectations of our society are too strong for any one of us to overcome by himself or herself. We need each other. We need each other's wisdom and insights into those areas of life where changes are most needed. We need each other's help in finding the best ways to go about making the needed changes. We need each other's encouragement. We need to know that others have the same problems and feel the same frustration, uncertainty and rejection we are feeling. We need to learn from each other's experience. We need each other's support. This is especially true of families with elementary and high school aged children. They find it especially difficult to be different. They are even more vulnerable to peer pressure than we. They may not fully understand or fully accept the convictions which are motivating us to be different. They especially need the support and companionship of a community with other children and youth who are wrestling with the same issues.

One group of people in our society who are already dealing with the difficulty of changing a life style are those who have made a substantial mid-career change in vocations. I was talking with Columbia Seminary Dean of Students, Erskine Clarke, about the students who have come to seminary as a result of a mid-career change. It was his perception that those at seminary made a better transition to a new life style than the others making such changes because the seminary community provided them a support group where they could be with others who were making the same adjustments.

It is the church's responsibility to provide this kind of community for those who are trying to live more simply. A strategy to which we should give high priority is the formation of support groups in which people can sit down with others who share

their convictions and work out ways and means to shape a simpler, less wasteful and less energy demanding style of living for themselves. It is naive to think that all, or even a majority of church members, are ready for this. But where the church has been faithful to its theological responsibilities, there are surely some who have seen the need and who are trying with varying degrees of success and frustration to make changes in their life style. We need to identify these folks in our congregations, to help them make contact with others and to encourage the formation of networks for mutual support and direction.

The third area of responsibility for the church in the energy crisis, which completes the triangle of ministry, is what we might label political. Here is the conclusion Drs. Shriver and Ostrom drew from the Urban Policy Study: "The Church, to maintain its own spirit and ethical vitality, must facilitate the involvement of the local congregation members in the political processes as well as talking about issues." I am using the term political in a broader sense than the traditional political process, although that is included. The heart of the concern is that it is not enough simply to talk about energy issues. We all are familiar with the ways we in the church make discussion a substitute for action. We talk the issue to death. We put so much time and effort into discussing the issue that we have nothing left for doing anything about it. The findings of the Urban Policy Study support this perception. It found that church members who discussed public policy issues but who were not helped to respond in active ways to these issues showed little change in outlook or attitude.

It is the responsibility of the church to find ways to bridge the gap between reflection and action and to assist its members in becoming actively involved in efforts aimed at resolving energy problems.

I want to suggest some kinds of activity in which the church surely needs to be involved. The church needs to get its own house in order first. It is improper as well as ineffective for the church to ask business and government to make changes it is not willing to make in its own institutional life. The first place to start is on the congregational level. I wonder how many of our congregations have done an energy audit of its facilities. The Church Energy Kit available from the National Council of Churches contains plans for local churches to use in such an audit and gives estimates of the costs and the savings figures one might expect from a variety of equipment and building alterations. We also need to evaluate our programs. We discovered recently that some of our families were making 4 to 6 round trips between home and church on a typical Sunday, driving various members of the family to church activities. Even in a town as small as Auburn, this adds up and it certainly complicates the lives of families. We are in the process of simplifying that schedule. A couple of summers ago we tried an earlier schedule for Sunday morning activities and found that moving the schedule up one hour together with setting the thermostat two degrees higher resulted in an almost 50% decrease in our energy consumption.

The programs of presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly also need to be evaluated from the standpoint of energy use. The travel requirements of the Presbyterian system as it presently operates is a serious problem. This is especially true at the synod and General Assembly levels. Bringing large committees together from long distances, while valuable from the standpoint of inclusiveness and broad-based participation in making decisions, is expensive and is wasteful of energy resources. The synod to which I belong is composed of 14 presbyteries spread across 4 states. Because the synod rules require someone from each presbytery to serve on

most synod committees, the cost of meetings is getting to be a severe problem. The Mission Board is also facing a similar problem and I understand is considering dropping one meeting per year. There is even talk of reducing General Assembly meetings to every second year. The issues at stake here are important. Simplifying our organizational life style may require that we put more authority in the hands of fewer people. It may even require that we reverse the trend toward larger presbyteries and synods and go back to the statewide synods and small presbyteries of a former day.

Even if the same organizational structure is maintained, and I don't know anyone pushing for another re-structure, the question must be asked by every court and every committee and every agency at every level from the congregation to the General Assembly: Is this trip really necessary? Is this meeting really necessary? Is this seminar or workshop or conference really necessary? Or could it be replaced by a letter or a conference telephone call or a regionally-based conference or eliminated altogether? Exploring these alternatives and others we have not yet thought about will be part of the work of simplifying our energy inefficient institutional life style. The first focus for our action should be the church itself.

Another area where the church has special responsibility for action is action on behalf of the poor who are hardest hit by the rising costs of energy. The 52% increase in natural gas rates and 36% increase in electricity rates folks in my area have experienced in the past year have required some belt tightening by most of us. But to a retired couple living on \$450/month or a mother and three children living on a \$156/month welfare payment, a \$100 utility bill is an economic calamity. Some help is now available from state and federal agencies. But the activity of church members is still needed to monitor these programs, to see that the assistance is adequate, to see that people know about and have access to the program, and to be ready to offer additional assistance to those whose needs are not met by these programs.

Another program needing church members' action and participation is the weatherization program which seeks to make the homes of the poor and the elderly more energy efficient. Churches should be active in securing and extending public transportation services. This is particularly needful in town and rural areas which have no bus system.

These are all areas of involvement where there is little disagreement. Now the hard question: But how can we facilitate the active involvement of church members in the formulation of public energy policy where there is no consensus and, as yet, no commonly accepted Christian position? It is possible and probable that perceptive and faithful Christians will, at times, be working on opposite sides of an issue. The discussions I have experienced give evidence of that probability. While the lack of a consensus should warn us against arrogance, it should not discourage our active participation in the public debate on energy policy. I want to offer for your consideration two principles to guide our involvement in the formulation of energy policy: (1) We need to act on the basis of the best knowledge and information available. This is a word of caution to those who are tempted to make energy decisions in the absence of reliable scientific data or to accept data on the basis of how well it supports the decision we have already made. Wishing a certain solution to the problem were possible will not make it so. No reliable, enduring or satisfactory solution to the energy crisis will be realized that is not technically sound and based on scientific principles and data. And (2) we need to act on the basis of our clearest faith commitments. This is a word of caution to those who are

tempted to make energy decisions solely on the basis of technical or economic feasibility without regard to their ethical impact. No reliable, enduring or satisfactory solution to the energy crisis will be realized that is not theologically sound and compatible with what we hold to be true about the nature of the universe, about human nature, and about God's will and purpose for both. Following these two principles will not produce a consensus of thinking or acting. However it will raise the level of the current public debate considerably. And for the present time this is as much of a consensus as the church needs to send its members into the laboratory, into the board meetings and into the political process to work on solutions.

This three-pronged approach I have suggested provides a rationale and a framework which the church can use in developing strategies for faithful and effective responses to the energy crisis. We don't have all the answers. We don't even know all the questions yet. But the church has important contributions to make to the eventual solution.

The Reformed tradition has always emphasized the Lordship of Christ over all areas of life and has stressed the Christian's life in the world as the arena in which his/her faith is to be applied and demonstrated. As we stand in this tradition, facing this particular set of problems, our responsibility is to see that our preaching and teaching, our policy decisions and pastoral activities are all aimed toward motivating, equipping, encouraging and facilitating the church as it works for the future which God is surely bringing to pass.

- (1) Pitrikin Sorokin, The Crisis of Our Age (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1941), pp. 22-29.
- (2) Don Shriver and Karl Ostrom, Is there Hope for the City? (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977).
- (3) Ibid., p. 109.
- (4) John Leith, An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), p. 88.
- (5) Don Shriver, et al., Spindles and Spires (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), p. 20.
- (6) Paul Tillich, The Sharing of the Foundation (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 106.
- (7) Norman Habel, "Only the Jackal is my Friend," Interpretation (Vol. XXXI, No. 3), p. 229.
- (8) Don Shriver and Karl Ostrom, Is there Hope for the City?, p. 113.