

CARING FOR CREATION NEWS

Let There Be Light

February 2009

2009 is now well underway. In the spirit of awards for everything these days, let's give the city of Grand Rapids a special shout. The West Michigan metropolis certainly made a priority of ringing in the New Year. Local TV coverage for the big downtown bash was near smothering. If you caught any of that hype, you know that the featured event was the big ball drop at midnight. 5-4-3-2-1 HAPPY NEW YEAR! Just like New York! Grand Rapids is playing with the big boys. Beyond all the downtown fun, you could feel the sense of pride. Grand Rapids is emerging as a destination. Grand Rapids is a player.

This New Year celebration has a lot to recommend it. It's in the spirit of our governor's Cool Cities initiative. Downtowns should be attractive places. People like to live in attractive places and urban density is one of the key components in supporting mass transit. Mass transit keeps private automobiles off the road and that's good for eliminating CO₂ emissions, one of the key global warming gasses. Urban density minimizes the travel and support services needed to move people through their daily routines. Less trucking and travel leads to greater efficiency and again, less CO₂ emission. Short supply lines are good; remember what happened when Napoleon stretched his too far?

But as is always the case, there's more than one way to look at these things. I received an e-mail from a friend. She heard that the big midnight ball used incandescent bulbs and operated at 35,000 watts. Isn't that working at cross purposes? Where's the environmental awareness that Grand Rapids is known for? Hey, even the New York City ball used LED bulbs! The Grand Rapids event raises some questions: Is there a balance in here somewhere? Just how vigilant do we have to be? Can't we ever just relax and have fun? Phooey with the green police and all their environmental correctness!

Here's my perspective. Yes, we do have to be vigilant. The science is clear enough; we can't keep dumping CO₂ into the atmosphere at current rates. Just as alarming, the rate at which we are demanding energy is increasing. Pre-industrial CO₂ levels were at 280 ppm. The current atmosphere is measuring 390 ppm. Scientists believe that 560 ppm is a dangerous threshold and shouldn't be crossed. There's nothing in our current ethic or cultural practice to suggest that anyone intends to apply the brakes before we hit the wall. Conserving 35,000 watts in Grand Rapids, however, is just a drop in the bucket. The real problem is that the event organizers never even gave their energy consumption a thought.

Grand Rapids missed an opportunity—a big opportunity. The ball drop had significant symbolic value and symbols count. Symbols move people and shape behavior. Why else would advertisers spend all those millions on carefully crafted ads? Grand Rapids missed the chance to say: "We intend for this to be

a vibrant, safe, and healthy community. We understand our challenges and we'll do whatever it takes to face them." What was missed here was a chance to communicate; what educators call the teachable moment.

Conservation and efficiency are two of the pieces necessary to craft a sustainable future; though important, they are not exclusive. Constructing the future is a complicated task—we need business and jobs, energy and commerce, fun and culture.

But most of all we need leadership and the determination to think through the jumble of interconnected human activities. Jan and Michael Hoffman in their new book, *Green - Your Place In The New Energy Revolution*, develop a framework for that analysis: Renewable Energy + Increased Energy Conservation + Energy Technologies that Don't Exist Yet = A Secure Energy Future. I choose to highlight conservation because it's the most accessible factor to all of us. In the United States on average, each person is responsible for 20.5 tons of annual CO₂ emissions. Much of that is avoidable. We could live just as well and emit less. Part of the solution is already under our control.

If you would like help in facing your energy conservation challenge, the Caring for Creation Ministry would like to assist. We will be offering a new curriculum: *Low Carbon Diet - A 30 day Program to Lose 5000 Pounds*. The material requires a month of concentrated focus on your own household. You will learn ways to reduce your carbon footprint and live more efficiently. The course design calls for a group of households to work through this material together. You won't be alone. In order to register, contact Peter Boogaart at 772-1659.

Paul in Romans says that "...all things work together for good to them that love God..." That statement is often understood to mean that despite any apparent logic whatsoever, God will somehow pull it out if you just wait long enough. I don't think that's what it means. I think that Paul is after something more fundamental; he's after the very structure of creation. Paul is referring to interdependence; the kind of relationships that naturalists describe when they discuss ecosystems and biodiversity. In a healthy system, everything has a place and when every organism plays its role, the whole system produces wellbeing.

What I've tried to suggest in this article is that we're not living in a healthy, balanced way. What Wendell Berry calls "our way of living problem" will jeopardize the created network of which we are a part; we need to get back to the garden. That's basic sin and fall kind of language. Our challenge is to embrace our own salvation language--when you're going the wrong way, turn around. Choose life. God is calling us to join in the divine project of restoration. What you're hearing is an invitation, not an order. Living toward the light requires a conscious decision. All things (when playing their created role) do work together for good.

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