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ENVIRONMENT

# Evangelist preaches equal rights for Mother Nature

## Believes deep ecology and Christianity can complement one another

By Nanette Kalis  
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For countless generations, Bible students have been taught that humans have dominion over nature.

But The Rev. Michael Dowd, pastor of St. Paul's United Church of Christ in Woodsfield, Ohio, says it's time to revise that view. In town earlier this month to present a workshop on deep ecology sponsored by the Appalachian Ohio Public Interest Center, Dowd told *The NEWS* he considers himself a Christian with an environmental bent — a sort of evangelist for Mother Nature.

In real terms, this means that Dowd places nature on the same pedestal as human beings. He says he believes that nature and people have equal rights. He's a tree-hugger, and he's proud of it. And he's the first to admit that this viewpoint doesn't always sit well with fellow theologians.

"I have the most trouble from people who are locked into a particular methodological belief system, and who understand that (system) literally," the minister says. Dowd, whose church is located in Southeastern Ohio's Monroe County, acknowledges that "some pastors in my community view me as a flaming heretic."

The label doesn't trouble him, he says, mainly because he knows exactly how those pastors feel. "Michael Dowd of eight years ago would have thought the Michael Dowd of today was a total heretic, (too)," he explains.

The transition from Fundamentalist preacher to Green Christian was gradual, Dowd says. Much of his transformation can be traced to expanding his mental and physical horizons. He read alternative viewpoints. And he began to meet with people "who were outside my view of the kingdom of God," Dowd says.

After much study and much contemplation, Dowd settled happily into a philosophy characterized by a number of impressive-sounding titles: deep ecology, new cosmology, ecological theology or creation spirituality. All view humans and nature as interrelated, rather than as separate from one another.

"We are not separate creatures on Earth," Dowd insists. "We did not come into this world. We grew out of it."

***"We are not separate creatures on Earth, we did not come into this world. We grew out of it."***

**—The Rev. Michael Dowd**

Using scientific data as his basis, Dowd also embraces the "Gaia Theory," which proposes that the Earth is a living system, breathing through the trees, digesting through the soil, purifying itself through the oceans.

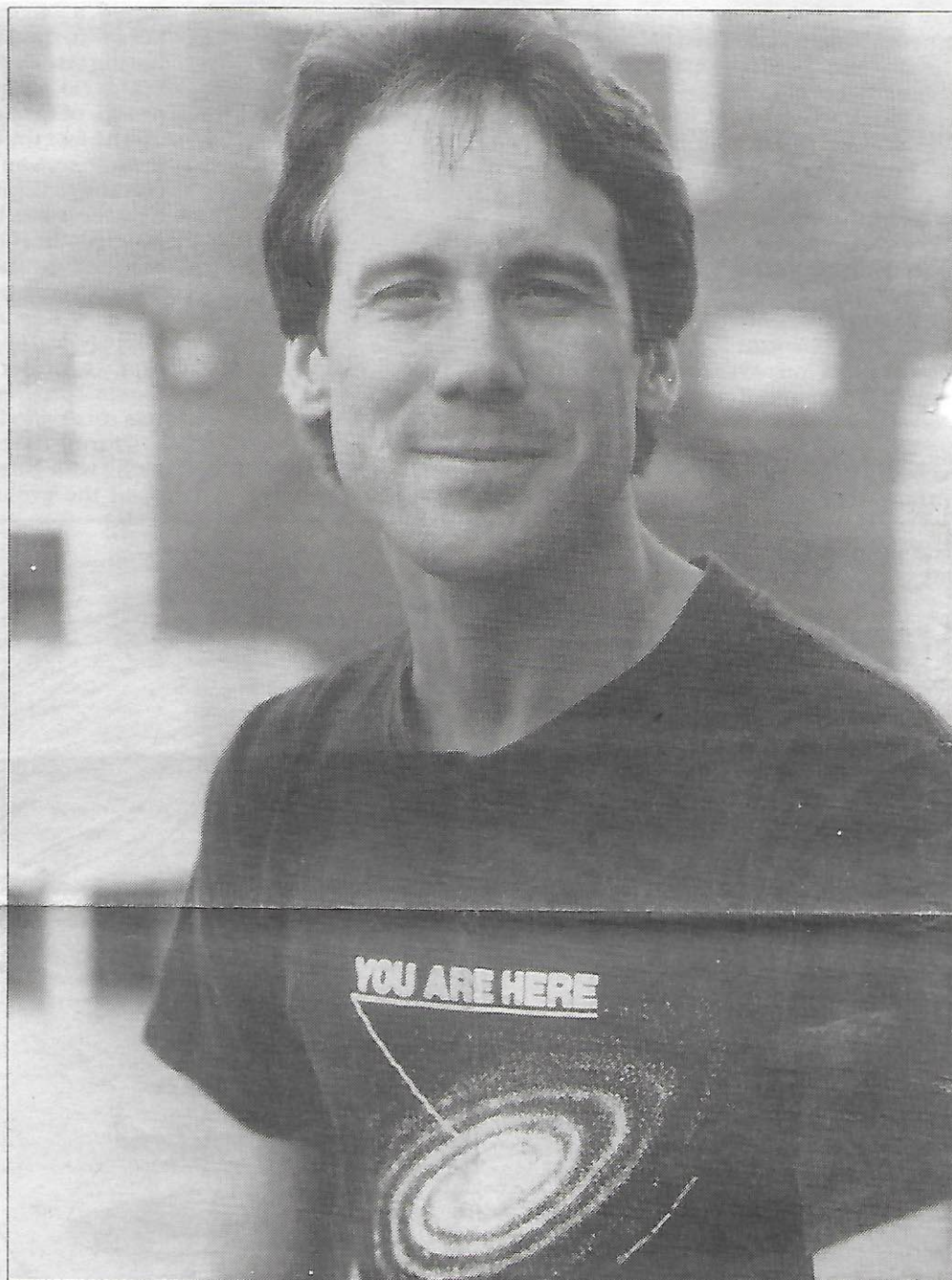
Dowd says the Gaia theory is not as irreconcilable to Christianity as some would believe. "Basically, (the traditional view says) God was a supreme landlord who resided off the planet," Dowd explains. Humans were God's number one tenants, and were encouraged to exploit the world for their own means. "This view allowed us to dissect animals with no moral pain," Dowd says. "Because of the sense of detachment, we've learned a lot about the natural world."

What we've learned supports the Gaia theory of a living, breathing Earth, Dowd says. And if one accepts that the mountains are the Earth's bones, that the Earth maintains its body temperature through its atmosphere — much like a living system maintains its bodily functions — then is it so hard to believe that the Earth has a brain? And that humans are the physical manifestations of that brain?

Dowd doesn't think such a notion is unreasonable. In fact, he once wrote in rather poetic terms that humans are "a star's way of appreciating and celebrating the awesomeness of its own creation."

Putting this theory into action is Dowd's life passion. "Now, we have to rebuild all of our traditions," he enthuses. "Our laws have to recognize that trees and rivers have a right to exist, a right to habitat ... There's a growing awareness that recycling alone isn't going to do it."

Dowd concedes that he is calling for a radical shift in the way humans view the world. But he is optimistic that that shift will occur.



NEWS photo/STAN KOKOTAJLO

The Rev. Michael Dowd

The alternative to not heeding the call for a new cosmology is to continue on the path of planetary extinction, Dowd warns. He likens today's consumer society to a cancerous growth. "Cut off from the rest of the system, it thinks

itself separate from the body," Dowd says. "It overpopulates and over-grazes — cancer kills itself when it overwhelms its environment."

Dowd would like humans to escape the same fate.