

The Columbia River Pastoral Letter has a passage on its second page that really summarizes both the goals and the process of the Pastoral. It says “The preservation of the Columbia Watershed’s beauty and benefits requires us to enter into a gradual process of conversion and change. Our goal is to review very broadly the present situation of the watershed; to reflect on our common regional history; to imagine a viable sustainable future for the watershed; and to seek ways to realize that vision.”

Reviewing the present situation of the watershed meant that we needed to read the Signs of the Times, and for the participants that meant travelling the length of the River from Nelson in British Columbia, to the Longhouse at Toppenish, to the reactors of the Hanford site and the nerve gas storage bunkers of Umatilla, to my own adopted city of Portland, and eventually to the estuary at Astoria. Everywhere we held listening sessions, which were respectful venues, in which all of the people of the River from every culture and race and employment could come to say what the River meant to them. We listened for a long time as the Pastoral Letter process commenced, and we heard a lot of voices, including some usually ignored in the past.

Reflecting on our regional history meant understanding what the Listening Sessions revealed, as the aspirations, accomplishments, and errors of our common past, without ignoring injustices, or privileging the paths we took in this region as an inevitable history. Bishop Skylstad’s leadership was really crucial to all of us taking a compassionate but unblinking look at what we saw. The Pastoral’s goal was to acknowledge rather than to blame, to come to a common understanding rather than to polarize.

Imagining a viable sustainable future, and seeking ways to realize that vision, meant understanding the interconnections within the intricate elements of the ecosystem, as well as understanding the interconnections between members of the human community in the Columbia River Basin. In a time when our nation seems ever more divided and partisan and, yes, bitter at times, a rereading of the Pastoral’s section “The Rivers of Our Vision” is actually a very hopeful thing. The vision of the Pastoral is meant to live not on paper but through its implementation in our region and equally in our lives.

Near the end of the Pastoral we find ways to realize this vision through the ten Considerations for Community Caretaking, which I and my University colleagues have employed for 15 years in our classes and in talks and writing. They go beyond 2001 and beyond this River Basin. In the most recent article I have been writing I have been using them as measures to evaluate the proposed Pebble Mine in Bristol Bay, Alaska, and they are as pertinent and fresh for that as they were the day the Bishops released the Pastoral Letter. The Pastoral also provided the structure for the “One River Ethics Matter” conferences that have taken place here in Spokane, in Portland, and very soon in Boise. The Pastoral models the regional dialogue we need for a just modernization of the Columbia River Treaty.

A number of us were fortunate enough to accompany the Bishops on the path to the Pastoral. Some of the Steering Committee are here tonight. If those of you present would hold up your hand when I mention your name, we are the Rev. Scott Coble, J.L. Drouhard, John Hart, Sr. Sharon Park, Sr. Cecilia Ranger, John Reid, and myself. Others who could not be here tonight include Robert Castagna, Frank Fromherz, Loretta Jancoski, the Rev. Pat Monette, Mark Petruncio, and Wes Towle. The four members of the steering committee who have passed away are Joseph Burns, Donna Hanson, the Rev. Ron Patnode, and Yvonne Smith.

The Bishops of this watershed came together in a powerful voice in the Pastoral Letter, but all of us involved know that Bishop William Skylstad, chair of the steering committee, was the project’s heartbeat. He made all of us more determined, patient, and thoughtful than nature had otherwise provided. For those of us from elsewhere he shared his lifelong and bone deep connection to this region in a way that couldn’t help but persist. For all of us he made words like conversion, common good, and dignity mean a great deal more. I am very thankful to have been given the opportunity to come here this evening to see Bishop Skylstad honored at the Winter Waters Celebration.

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