

The Bishop's Message

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The rightful place of science in church

by Bishop Sally Dyck

Let's take a break from campaigns, elections, and politics for a moment.

Let's take a break from the economy. (Don't you wish we could?)

Did you know that Feb. 13 – 15 is being promoted by some Christians as Evolution Weekend? (I didn't say I was taking a break from controversy!)

Feb. 12 is the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth (in case you didn't have it in your birthday book). In addition, 2009 is the 150th anniversary of the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. As a result, we will be hearing a lot about Darwin this month. So maybe we Christians should rethink faith and science, not just Darwin or evolution.

There are few people as misunderstood as Darwin, with the possible exception of Galileo. Both of these men were people of faith who observed God's creation. Darwin was about to go to seminary to become a priest and decided to go on the *HMS Beagle's* expedition instead. Along the way, he had a career change.

Darwin was fascinated with nature and observed the ways in which nature adapts. He focused on finches, mockingbirds, and worms (not apes). From those observations, he developed the idea of natural selection and proposed the concept of evolution.

Darwin didn't publish his ideas until much later in his life because he knew that they would create a stir. When he thought he might get scooped by another scientist, he published them — to the expected fury of the church. However, his theory was well accepted during his lifetime and fully acclaimed by the 1940s, when the development of genetics reinforced it.

The fury has continued to the present. While Darwin is often presented as a “godless naturalist,” he was a man of faith who, like Galileo, used the power of observation to present scientific hypotheses that continue to inform science today. I encourage you to learn more about Darwin, especially if you have always been taught and assumed that he was nothing short of the devil!

Why would I raise this issue regarding science and faith? In his inaugural address, President Barack Obama said that “we will restore science to its rightful place.” I've thought about that and believe that the “rightful place” of science in the church is to have more open, exploratory, educational, and faith-based conversations about science.

We have shied away from them because of long years of painful discussions. It's time that we learn both the science and the faith deeply enough to actually have productive conversations.

How can we raise the issues from a faith-based perspective?

You can find some information about an ecumenical group called The Clergy Letter Project (www.evolutionweekend.com), which attempts to get congregations and clergy to support a greater openness to study and conversations about science and faith, specifically issues around evolution.

Last year's United Methodist General Conference passed at least three petitions that accept the theory of evolution. One opposes the introduction of any faith-based theories such as creationism or intelligent design into public-school science curricula.

The addition made to ¶160 F of the Social Principles states in part: "We find science's descriptions of cosmological, geological, and biological evolution are not in conflict with theology." The Book of Resolutions 2008 includes two resolutions that address the topic: #1027, "God's Creation and the Church," and #5052, "Evolution and Intelligent Design."

To learn more about Darwin — and possibly be surprised at what you learn — review the "Evolution and Wonder" episode of the radio program Speaking of Faith. You can hear the program or read a transcript at <http://www.speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/darwin/index.shtml>.

If we want to reach new people, especially young adults but also some of us Baby Boomers, we need to open our minds and hearts in learning, discussing, and growing in our appreciation of how science and faith are partners, not competitors, of experiencing God's world.

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