

# Tough Questions, Hard Decisions Ahead in World Population Year

By Religious News Service

"Man, on his present course, is in sober truth an endangered species," according to British economist Barbara Ward.

"No planet," says Miss Ward, who is president of the International Institute for Environmental Affairs, "can carry indefinitely the freight of population, aspiration, consumption, destruction, and exhaustion with which we threaten it."

"Survival is now simply the issue of whether we can learn and change in time."

The launching of the United Nations 1974 "World Population Year" underscores the urgency of the challenge and reflects a growing consensus among nations that population growth is a global concern that will require research and active cooperation on nothing smaller than global scale.

On Jan. 1, the beginning of World Population Year, the earth's estimated population was 3,898,000,000. At the close of 1974, it will have grown to 3,982,000,000.

If population growth continues at the current rate until the year 2000, demographers expect some seven billion people — almost double the present figure — will occupy the planet.

It is the significance of population growth rates as a major component of any plan for social and economic development that will be subjected to world wide scrutiny during 1974.

The purpose of the U.N. World Population Year, says Rafael M. Salas, executive director of the U.N. Fund for Population Activities, "is nothing less than to raise the consciousness of the world on this one subject and its implications for rich countries and poor alike."

Emphasizing the year's focus, "the totality of the relationship between population and development," Salas strongly urges Church groups and individual lay and clerical members to use "their influence" in governments and non-governmental organizations "on behalf of the aims of World Population Year."

One of the first responses from churches to the year came from Britain, last December. Eleven church leaders, in letters sent to churches of all Christian denominations throughout Britain in connection with the year, advocated worldwide family planning programs.

"Without a worldwide family planning program," said the letters, "the balance between the world's population and its natural resources will be seriously upset. Our planet will suffer more, not less, starvation, unemployment, squalor, and pollution."

Signers of the letters were the Anglican Bishops of Birmingham, Bristol, Newcastle, St. Albans, Kingston, and Woolwich; the secretary of the Methodist Conference; leaders of the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian), the Baptist Union, and the United Reformed Church.

Also signing was Jesuit Archbishop Thomas D. Roberts, formerly Roman Catholic Archbishop of Bombay, India, and now retired.

According to a growing consensus of expert opinion, judicious family planning, while a must, is but one factor in the over-all population equation. Demographers point out that while too high a growth rate certainly poses a threat in many areas to the very possibility of anything more human than survival, there is no reason to think that simply reducing the growth rate will automatically result in

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***—Barbara Ward***

achievement of those values associated with "development."

Hence, say these experts, there is need both of facing the difficulties of exaggerated or run-away population increase and of resisting the tendency to treat it as somehow independent of a complex tangle of social and economic threads.

It is this demographic complexity that is the concern of the World Population Year, which will be highlighted by the U.N.-sponsored World Population Conference in Bucharest, Romania, Aug. 19-30.

The first such conference involving governmental representatives and aimed specifically at influencing governmental population policies, the conclave will attempt to chart a uniform approach to population problems under the theme of "One World For All." An estimated 3,000 delegates from more than 140 countries are expected to attend.

In addition, there will be a "Population Tribunal" in Bucharest, at which some 600 non-governmental organization delegates will conduct a concurrent forum with lectures by political and academic leaders, seminars, workshops, exhibits, and film exhibitions.

Preceding these two events, Aug. 11-15, will be the International Youth Conference in the Romanian capital, whose participants will later join with the Population Tribunal delegates.

The youth conference will include representatives of the World Alliance of the YMCAs and the World YMCA.

Agencies planning activities of the Population Tribunal include the World Assembly of Youth, the World Council of Churches' Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, the International Planned Parenthood Federation, and the International Catholic Child Bureau.

In preparation for the climactic Bucharest Conference, the U.N. has already sponsored three regional symposia, whose purpose was to produce working papers for the representatives at the August parley.

These symposia dealt, respectively, with population and development; population, natural resources, and environment; and population and social and cultural aspects of family well-being.

A fourth symposium, in January, focused on population and human rights.

Despite the impressively broad consensus of concern and the ambitious

planning poured into the World Population Year, many difficult questions remain close at hand.

Two years ago, when U.N. Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim officially proclaimed 1974 as the World Population Year, he said that the planned World Population Conference would deal with all aspects of the demographic problem, including "most emphatically, moral ones."

"It has been a fundamental (U.N.) tenet," he said, "that there must be freedom of choice for individuals to shape their family life according to their beliefs and aspirations, and for governments to pursue the policies that are most in keeping with the physical and spiritual welfare of the people."

On Nov. 13, 1973, the U.S. Roman Catholic Bishops, endorsing a "positive attitude" toward the 1974 World Population Year, called for "recognition of moral and ethical principles, convictions about human rights and the good of society, and a determination to preserve the true values of marriage and human life."

While recognizing the competence of governments with regard to population problems, the bishops insisted that decisions about "family size and the frequency of births" belong to parents and "cannot be left to public authorities."

In making these decisions, however, the prelates said with equal insistence, parents must take into account their "responsibilities towards God, themselves, the children they have already brought into the world, and the community to which they belong."

But hard questions remain, with "the classical moral issues" of parental and governmental responsibilities for "population control" placed in "a startling new context," according to Jesuit Father Edward J. Cripps, U.N. representative of Pa. Romana, an international Catholic students' organization.

"How should we further elaborate the widely acknowledged right of a couple to determine the size of its family?" he asks. "And how relate this right to the common good of an overpopulated nation? What are the acceptable means available to governments attempting responsibly to control population growth for the common good? What legal recognition of conscientious objection to their policies must be assured?"

"Most basically, according to what criteria, and in relation to what other values, do we judge that there are 'too many' people in a nation or area, or that a certain growth rate is 'optimal'?"

These, says Father Cripps, are some of the tough questions about which "hard decisions" will have to be made. "And," he adds, "it will require great wisdom to harmonize sound public policy, family rights and basic personal and cultural attitudes toward the communication of life itself."

What the long-range effect of the year will be is anybody's guess.

And perhaps it is too much to expect anything even remotely resembling an international consensus on nitty-gritty ways and means of balancing people and resources to emerge from the prestigious Bucharest Conference.

But, says Barbara Ward, one thing is abundantly, painfully clear: "The planet itself is desperately signaling to us the millennial lesson of all the world's prophets and poets — that we must love each other or we must die."