

NURTURING THE EARTH

*'Geologist' Michael Dowd
preaches that religion,
ecology are intertwined*

By DIANNE APRILE
Staff Writer

You could call Michael Dowd a preacher who's out to save the world.

But he wouldn't exactly go along with that.

He'd say he's out to help the world save itself — or, more precisely, "to help Earth save herself." Dowd believes in a self-healing planet. All we need to do is stop the destruction, he says, and let the recovery begin.

Dowd, who brought his message to Louisville last weekend, calls himself a "geologist." That's shorthand for a theologian who believes that getting right with God means getting right with Earth.

His central metaphor, his basic parable, goes like this:

Think of Earth as our Greater Self. We humans are the cells of that larger body. When we poison oceans and rivers or strangle rain forests, we are destroying our own bloodstreams and lungs.

"The destiny of Earth and destiny of humanity is the same destiny," he says, repeating the theme that underlies his lectures, workshops and books.

This idea is not new, of course. It's all over the place in the Bible, Old Testament and New. The divine dwelling within us; the vine and its branches. It's an integral concept in the major Eastern religions as well as of American Indians. Modern scientists from Albert Einstein to Lewis Thomas also have celebrated the idea of the interconnectedness of life throughout the universe.

But the practical implications of this spiritual belief have

been largely pushed aside in Western culture, Dowd contends, in favor of a more mechanistic view of our relationship with God and with Earth.

We have become accustomed to seeing ourselves as separate and distinct from both, he says. And that sense of disconnection, reinforced by assumptions we've drawn from Genesis, is what he believes lies at the heart of the environmental crisis we face today.

"My faith is in God as capital L Life, as capital R Reality, as capital M Mystery," Dowd told a small but seemingly spellbound crowd at the University of Louisville Friday night.

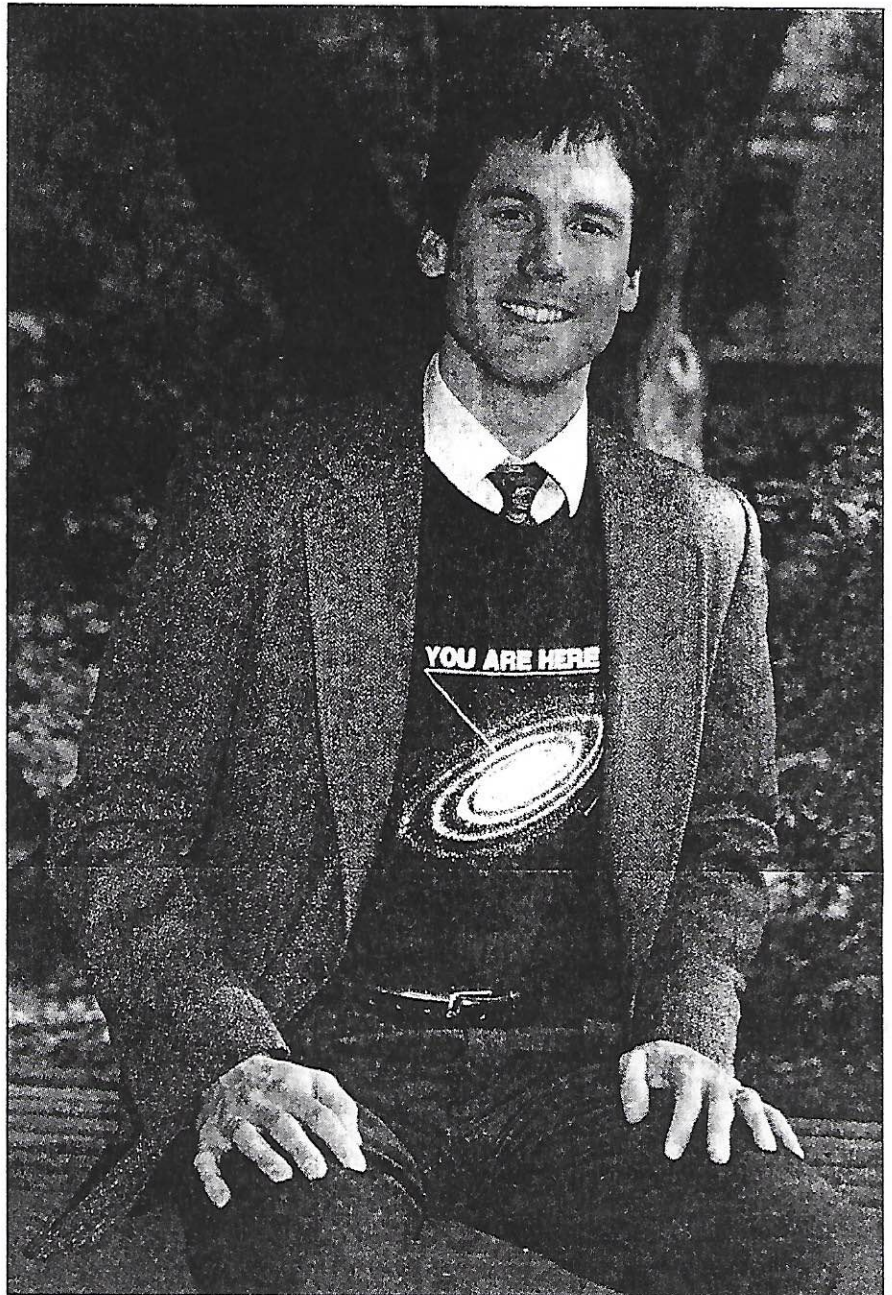
On a blackboard behind him, he had sketched a time line illustrating the major "events" during the 15 billion years scientists say the universe has been evolving. In the course of that particular "creation story," Dowd said, there is evidence of several periods when the end of Earth seemed to be at hand.

But in each case the planet recovered and, in fact, took a major creative step toward greater complexity. At one of those points, fairly recently in the story of the universe, human life appeared.

Pointing to the time line, Dowd told his audience, "My faith is in this process."

Dowd admits that he is first and foremost a "popularizer" of other people's ideas.

He borrowed the "geologist" label from Thomas Berry, for example. Berry is a Passionist priest whose writings, published by the Sierra Club, have helped fuel a movement to



which Dowd is an energetic disciple.

It is actually a convergence of movements, embracing the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in the earlier part of this century as well as the current and controversial "creation spirituality" of the Dominican priest Matthew Fox. Dowd alternately refers to it as "the new cosmology," a phrase coined by Berry, or "deep ecology," a psychological approach that encourages tapping into our emotional, not just physical, ties to the Earth.

All of these movements are aimed at people who want to integrate their religious and spiritual beliefs with a "lifestyle that makes sense ecologically," Dowd says.

His own religious background is a crazy quilt of spiritual experience. Raised Roman Catholic, Dowd

switched to a fundamentalist denomination when he was "saved" at the age of 18. Now, at 33, he is pastor of a United Church of Christ congregation in "very rural southeast Ohio." He and his wife and three young children live in the town of Woodfield, which he locates as "two hours from everything."

Within his own denomination, Dowd says he is viewed as "a prophet" by some and a "New Age heretic" by others. Where he is finding the most receptive audience, however, is among mainstream Protestants and Catholics, he says.

Whenever he can, Dowd hits the road in his station wagon, packing it with copies of his

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STAFF PHOTO
BY PAM SPAULDING

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book "EarthSpirit: A Handbook for Nurturing an Ecological Christianity," spreading what he considers the good news about the mess we're in, from town to town, campus to campus, pulpit to pulpit.

Friday he rolled into Louisville (having accidentally left his books at home) with just enough time to make a radio interview with Cameron Lawrence, host of "Down To Earth," a weekly broadcast on WFPL radio that focuses on environmental issues.

At ease speaking into a radio mike, Dowd expressed his optimism with what he sees to be a growing and "radical reinterpreting of Christianity" — one that is more sensitive to ecological issues and one that calls for "celebrating other faiths" as well.

His book, for example, looks at basic tenets of Christian theology — such as the role of suffering and salvation — and broadens their traditional emphasis. Redemption becomes something essential not only to humans, but also to "the whole Earth," Dowd says.

He sees himself primarily as a storyteller, and his talks do, indeed, take on a lively, humorous narrative shape.

"I'm not an expert," he told his U of L audience, then qualified that with a line borrowed from another writer on ecology, Albert LaChance: "What's an expert anyway,

but someone who used to be a 'pert?'"

The main story he tells wherever he goes is "the new cosmology." He defines it as a new worldview, a way of looking at the story of our evolution — from the big bang to the current environmental crisis — as a spiritual story, not just a scientific one.

"For the first time in history, we have one creation story that we all can agree on," he said at U of L. Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Taoists, American Indians. Because it is the story of the beginnings of all life in the universe — rather than that of a single species, race or creed — it holds the potential for uniting people, rather than dividing them, he said.

Even for those who have never doubted that evolution is our creation story, the biblical account of the beginning of human life has enormous subconscious impact on how we think about and treat the natural world, Dowd said.

For example, if you imagine God giving humans "dominion" over nature or making them "stewards" of it, then you will treat the Earth with less kindness and empathy than if you view yourself and the natural world as part of one larger body of life created by God.

Dowd believes that no amount of recycling or reforestation — "shallow environmentalism," he calls it — will alter the course we're on. It will require a dramatic change in our worldview first, a shift that will

make us see that it is in our self-interest to reverse our course.

"We're trying now to get out of the mess we're in without changing the glasses we're seeing it through," he said. "It won't work."

His U of L audience was not typical of any group. There were kids who could have been in middle school, a spattering of college students, a few midlifers and a healthy representation of men and women in the "senior citizen" category.

Dowd encourages his audiences to ask questions at various times during his talks. At one point, two teachers from St. Xavier High School said they planned to use his book as a text for seniors next year. "I think, if you really feel that interconnectedness, you could not hurt someone else," one of them said.

Dowd's book and workshops, like the one he held in Louisville yesterday, are aimed at making people more aware of their connections to other people and to the natural world through reading, discussing, meditating and "grieving" over the damage done to the Earth.

He compares the techniques of this kind of consciousness-raising to the popular support-group movements of the day, including the men's movement, that encourage members to feel their pain and move on, rather than deny it and stay stuck. ~

"We need to grieve for all of creation," Dowd said. "We need to grieve for Earth."