



GREENING YOUR CONGREGATION

GOING TO THE NEXT LEVEL

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Many green teams work hard to bring care-for-creation into the life of a congregation and are ready to go to the next level—but they are not sure what to do or how to do it. Because every situation is different, one cannot give advice that will work in all cases. Therefore, what follow is a series of reflections and suggestions about how to move forward. Pick and choose which ones might be helpful for you in your context.

Seeing the thresholds. In community organizing, one begins small where one can and in ways that are do-able. However, after you have done some things, you often hit a threshold that enables you to do some things you could not do at the start. So you move it up a notch. Then you do some more things, at which point there may be wider support or there may be a new foundation on which to continue building. So you ask: Now that we have reached this threshold, what can we do next? How can we go to the next level? You have reached some thresholds. Now consider: What is possible to do now that you could not have done before. Discernment is a gift. Use it!

Reclaim the *identity* goal. The congregational goal of greening your parish is to incorporate care for creation thoroughly into the identity and work of the entire congregation. Does everyone know that “we are a congregation that cares for creation?” Assess in what ways you have done that—worship, education, office, property, member lifestyle, and so on. Celebrate these achievements in the congregation as a whole. In this way, you will help to bring others along to the next level. Then assess in what ways the basic congregational identity goal has not yet been met. Identify those areas and begin to reflect on next steps.

Reclaim the *mission* goal. The congregational goal of greening your parish is to incorporate care for creation thoroughly into the mission of the entire congregation. The church exists for the sake of the world. Does the community around you see that “you are a congregation that cares for creation”? Therefore, we can ask: In what ways have the actions of your congregation served efforts to spread Earth-care into your community and into the world at large? Assess in what ways you have done that. Celebrate these in the congregation as a whole. Then assess in what ways this goal has not yet been met. Identify those areas and begin to reflect on next steps.

Deepen your Christian Commitment. Find ways to affirm the biblical, theological, and ethical roots for ecological actions and attitudes. It is very important to take action and to promote public policies. At the same time, we need also to change our hearts and our consciousness. We need to re-imagine the world as a place of sustainable living. We need to have a felt commitment to nature and to ecological justice. This can be done in worship, in the educational program, in experiences with nature, and in opportunities for personal testimony.

Institutionalize every advance. If you have not done so, seek to make sure that the gains you have made become part of the regular life of the congregation. Is the green team part of the church structure? Is creation-care part of the mission statement of the congregation? Do the task descriptions of the church council and the standing committees include responsibilities related to Earth-care? Are the staff members—office manager or maintenance person—on board to continue the patterns of commitment? Are you set to celebrate the Season of Creation every year? Institutionalizing these will support your next steps.

Fill the holes. In what ways has creation care not yet become part of the full life of the congregation? Consider each of the standing committees or task groups of the church. Where might you expand the influence of the green team? Is creation-care an integral part of the conversation and decision-making of the church council? Is it evident in the food and practices of the coffee hour and the church dinners? Is the youth group involved? Is it integral to the children’s education? Is there a women’s group, a men’s group, or a senior group that is not involved? In what ways would a visitor

to your congregation be able to recognize readily your commitment to Earth-care? In what ways would they not? These questions may lead you to expand your work.

Broaden the commitment. Is every individual in your congregation involved in Earth-care at some level, even if it is the minimal level of having a place to recycle bulletins after worship? Identify what people are not involved and ask what could be done to engage them in creation care in the life of the congregation.

Try a new approach. Consider using one of the seven strategies described in the manual to engage the whole congregation in Earth care: action based on brainstorming; action based on learning; action based on needs; action based on opportunities; action based on congregational assets; action based on consensus; and action based on joining forces with other congregations or groups in the community.

Practice sustainability. Keep in mind that sustainability is like a stool with three legs: Does it promote *ecological sustainability*? Does it foster *economic sustainability*, especially for the poor? Does it foster *social sustainability*, that is, does it build community? Add now a fourth leg to the stool: Does it promote *religious sustainability* in depth of understanding and commitment? As you go to the next level, in relation to every action and project, ask in what ways *the project itself* as well as *how it is accomplished* might serve all four legs of sustainability.

Teachable moments. When you engage in an act of care-for-creation, explain to the congregation: 1. Why we are doing it. 2. How we are doing it to promote sustainability. 3. What we hope the outcomes will be. These explanations will strengthen the identity of the congregation as a green congregation. It will deepen the Christian commitment to this work. And it will serve as a model to those who learn from the combination of action and explanation.

Keep care-for-creation before the attention of the congregation. Social change agents say that if you wish to get the attention of a group, use seven different media: bulletins, newsletters, bulletin boards, e-mail, personal contact, posters, church signs, announcements/testimonies in worship, and so on. Be imaginative. There are resources developed to go into weekly bulletins or newsletters: eco-tips from the green team; excerpts from social statements; quotations from writers and poets. The youth may be able to assist with bulletin boards and posters.

Re-read the Green Congregation Manual. Have your committee read the entire manual. This has a wealth of information and ideas for you to (re-)consider. Note that the role of the green team is to be a catalyst to the rest of the congregation, so that everyone takes ownership. Consider the ideas suggested in each area: worship, education, building and grounds, personal discipleship at home and work, and public ministry/ political advocacy. Re-visiting your beginnings may re-ignite the vision and stimulate you to be generative—to think of actions not mentioned in the manual.

Choose a big impact project. Small actions by a lot of people can have a widespread effect. They often lay the groundwork for bigger things. Consider now doing a project with a large impact—either in terms of congregational involvement or in terms of outcome on behalf of Earth. These types of projects can occur in many areas of congregational life. You can also choose one that people can see as they pass by the church, such as a windmill, a solar panel, or a community garden.

Be imaginative and visionary: The author of *Revelation* gives a stirring vision of the New Jerusalem (chapter 21) as a way to draw his audience into actions designed to bring that vision to reality in the present. Imagine what your congregation would be like if you were thoroughly and completely to incorporate creation-care into your identity, life, and mission. Think about all areas of church life as well as the building and grounds. What would make your congregation distinctive and different? What would visitors see and experience? Write up that image. Now use your imagination to tackle efforts that will make that vision happen NOW.

Transform worship. The goal is to incorporate care for creation into every worship service. In what ways have you not done that yet? Think about all the parts of a worship service and consider what planning needs to be done to make creation care and creation celebration a natural and integral

dimension of worship. There are resources in the congregational manual for doing this. Explain to the worshiping community the Earth care importance of your current traditions and practices. Consider instructing the congregation on why you are doing something each time you innovate. Does the pastor make creation concerns a part of preaching? Have you discovered how the church year relates to the cycles of nature and how the themes of the church seasons can be connected with nature and ecological justice?

Worship in nature as the sanctuary. What might you do to enable your congregation to think of all creation as your larger worshiping community and nature as the sanctuary? Take worship outside in the church yard. Meet some Sundays in striking natural settings near your church. Make the most of windows in the sanctuary to see the continuity between inside and outside. Bring nature inside—plants, trees, flowering plants, ivy on the inside walls, perhaps even an aquarium or gerbil cage. See your congregation as part of Earth community: name all the plants and animals on your property and consider them your worshipping partners.

Celebrate special days. Do you celebrate the Season of Creation? Earth Day Sunday? A blessing of the Animals? Rogation Day? Thanksgiving? A greening-of-the-cross service? Find ways to celebrate regularly in the church year. There are resources online for each of these.

Small and big in worship. Can you do a lot of small practices in worship that add up to a significant impact: touch the baptismal water; connect water to pollution and shortage; invoke all creation to worship each week; always have a petition on behalf of an endangered species; Pray for a human community threatened by global warming; include a confession of ecological sins; receive an Earth blessing. Or do something dramatic: put out a bushel of wheat and a large bowl of grapes to connect to Eucharist; provide an eternal light powered by the sun; put trees in the sanctuary; place an aquarium in the worship space; show slides of nature with music as a prelude; and on and on. Use imagination to shake people into a new awareness.

Educate for the ecological age. There are DVD series on Earth-care, films to watch, books to discuss, and sites to visit. Look for the links section on the web of creation and surf the many organizations that promote Earth-care. Find out what the denominational resources and themes are for creation-care. Draw on experts in ecology from local colleges or government agencies to demonstrate our ecological problems and possibilities. Schedule outdoor retreats or nature excursions. Use resources for Vacation Church School that develop a connection to creation.

Try unorthodox methods of education. Do what needs to be done to dramatize polluted soil, food shortages, loss of species, unlimited trash, carbon glut, the need for renewable energy, among other ecological concerns. Put amazing and disarming ecological facts around the church. Put up a windmill. Set up a rain garden. Plant an orchard. As Wendell Berry says, "Practice resurrection."

Reframe the roots of faith in an environmental age. Find ways to educate the whole congregation about the biblical and theological roots of care for creation—creation, sin, redemption, justification, Holy Spirit—reinterpreted for an ecological age. Connect faith to ecology in graphic ways. Post around the church insightful quotations from theologians and ethicists. Put into newsletters excerpts of biblical passages about creation. Use every occasion to do some care-for-creation practice/action and then comment on in terms of faith convictions.

Center care for creation in our lives. How can we get past the idea that caring for creation is not an add-on to the Christian life or limited to the interest of a few? How can we promote the idea that loving creation is as foundational as loving our neighbor? How can we make Earth-keeping central to our vocation as being keepers or our sisters and brothers? Imagine new ways to increase awareness of this concern and to address these questions.

Reduce your carbon footprint. This is the most important thing you can do for Earth, its eco-systems, and all earth community. Tools are readily available for you to measure your footprint and then investigate every avenue to reduce it. Set a goal for yourself as a congregation and measure the economic and ecological payoffs. Announce these. Then challenge every member to do the

same in their homes. Engage everyone in this endeavor.

Monthly Emphases. Choose an ecological issue and then promote action and reflection at church and home: water, energy, transportation, food, and so on. There are resources on the site for such a program. Work it by the month or by the quarter or by the seasons of the church year. For each emphasis, explain the ecological concern, show the eco-justice consequences, take actions at church, commit to certain practices at home, and witness to each other about what you have done.

Do a comprehensive *environmental audit*. This is not just an energy audit. Take the rounds and evaluate everything you do that as a congregation that has an impact on the environment: purchases, recycling, water use, electricity, heat, paper use, cleaning products, food at coffee hour and church dinners, and so on. Go over the check list for “Congregations Their Buildings and Grounds.” Use the manual “Environmental Guide for Congregations, Their Buildings and Grounds. Be as comprehensive as possible. Do an “extreme makeover” for the environment!

Use your land in imaginative ways. Try to think about the uses of your land for the benefit of Earth. See your property as an Earth Community, space you share with many living things. Name and learn the plants and animals on your property. Include pictures of them in the church directory as part of your Earth Community. Include their names in the invocation to worship and in prayer petitions. Plant large flower beds for beauty. Plant some rain gardens. Put up a lot of trees. Create a peace garden or set up a labyrinth. Put large property in a land trust. Make a prairie as means to restore it to a natural state. Make your property a striking statement of your commitment for Earth to thrive.

Strengthen the commitment of members at home. You may have done a lot in the congregation, but how much difference have you made in the personal lives of members? What can you do to engage the commitment of people in their homes? What about a light bulb challenge to the congregation as a whole to see how many CFLs can be added to members’ homes and how many carbon emissions can be reduced by your actions? Or ask for a commitment to have a “Meatless Monday” each week during Lent to reduce carbon footprint.

Make a covenant with Creation. At a worship service, invite people to fill out their personal covenant with creation and dedicate it as part of their offering to God and their spiritual discipline. Examples of such covenants are available online, along with a brief dedication ritual. Such a covenant gives members an opportunity to make a commitment to reduce energy use, use green cleaning products, eat less meat, lessen transportation emissions, and so on. If you have already invited people to make such a covenant, be sure to repeat it annually, perhaps on Earth Day Sunday or in the fall at the time of the Blessing of the Animals. Or contact people personally and invite them to do this. Examples of such covenants are available online, along with a brief dedication ritual, in the section on “discipleship at home and work.”

Hold workshops. Train members to green their homes in a comprehensive way. Use the extensive “Covenant with Creation” checklist to identify what each household has done and can still do. Get information to share on eco-friendly products and services in your area. Train members to green their work places. There are resources for making an office into an Earth-friendly place. Hold a workshop on public policy issues in your area and train people on getting involved. Invite other churches to join your workshops. Get folks involved!

Public Ministry. Reach out into the neighborhood and community with your commitment to exist for the sake of the world. If your congregation is part of a vulnerable community in the city, identify ways in which the environment contributes to injustice and ill health in your community. Explore ways in which these concerns can be addressed. If you are in middle class or affluent neighborhood, find out about the poor and suppressed areas of the city. How can you collaborate with these neighborhoods to increase health, get rid of toxins in the air or in brown fields, and take actions that increase economic, ecological, and social sustainability?

Join with other congregations. Look around at other congregations in your denomination and in other denominations and join together in this common endeavor. Plan for the green teams of many

churches to meet two or three times a year for reports to each other and an educational program to assist your efforts. Such sharing generates a lot of energy and excitement as people can see what others are doing. The interaction enables you also to do some collaborative projects together: sponsor a joint worship service on Earth Day, lower costs with joint purchases of energy-saving equipment, or tend a community garden together.

Spread your greening to the community. Work with city officials and other environmental organizations in your area to green your community. There are programs, such as Transitions US, the Natural Step, among others, that cities are embracing as a way to bring all aspects of city life into the environmental age: transportation, energy use, use of green cleaning products for government and schools, restoration of habitats, recycling programs, green city events, and so on. Churches can spearhead many of these movements in local communities.

Sponsor events for the community. Here is an opportunity to share what you have learned. Plan and publicize an event for the community that raises awareness and offers resources for faith communities to embrace care-for-creation: hold an ecumenical, interfaith worship service; sponsor a city-wide eco-fair; show a DVD that highlights religious care for creation, such as *Renewal*, with a discussion to follow; set up an evening event with a guest lecturer on some aspect of the environment; and hold workshops on greening your congregation or learning about public policy. Sponsor such events jointly with as other like-minded organizations.

Forge partnerships between a thriving congregation and a congregation at risk. Sharing resources and people power to assist vulnerable congregations can be a way to double your efforts: weatherize, reduce energy costs, provide a loan for a new boiler, advocate together for clean air and water, plant trees for beauty and cleaner air, among other things. A study and survey of what people need and want in their environment can help to clarify what can be done.

Advocate for Earth-care public policies. We need to change not only personal and congregational behavior; we also need to change the public systems that allow and enable earth destructive practices. Collaborate with a local advocacy group around environmental issues. Learn about the laws and policies at the national and global levels that foster care for creation. Educate people on these matters. Instruct people on how to make their support known to legislators. Sign people up to receive action alerts and respond to them. Work with your church advocacy leadership and public policy offices to give guidance and direction to you. Encourage and train members to be active "citizens for Earth."

Each one teach one. Take what you have learned, find another congregation that desires to develop a green congregation and be partners and mentors in their endeavor. This is one of the best ways to strengthen your own efforts while assisting someone else. In the end, you have a partner.

Be a flagship congregation. Show others what a congregation looks like that loves God, loves the neighbor, and cares for creation. Put it on your outdoor board, post it on the website, announce it in the newspaper, and live it every week. This will do a great deal to inspire others to embrace the same identity and mission.

Do not be overwhelmed. This is a lot of information. No doubt you have thought of other things in relation to your situation. Choose from these ideas. Choose what will take you to the next level. Do not choose more than is realistic to accomplish. Choose what may take you to another level beyond this one. Choose what people are excited about. Choose something that is needed. Choose what will generate energy rather than deplete it. Do it with a sense of freedom and joy. Stay rooted on your faith as means to sustain you in this work. You can only do what you can do. So plant the seeds and trust God for a harvest.

Fall in love with creation. Find ways for you and your congregation to discover anew the love of God for all creation. God has created all things for their own sake, not for what they can do for humans. God is in all things "working for good." We can be restored not only by our relationship with nature, but also by our relationship with God in nature. By loving nature and by caring for it and

about it, we align ourselves with God's deep and abiding love for all things. Because we encounter in nature a God of love who cares for the most vulnerable, we will be empowered to do the same.