



GREENING YOUR CONGREGATION

REVIVING YOUR EFFORTS

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What do you do when you have had a green team for several years and you hit some problems: you hit a plateau: interest fades, you face resistance, or you have run out of energy or ideas? Here are some reflections to help jumpstart your efforts again.

This is a common problem. It is not unusual for there to be rhythms in the work of a group seeking to renew a community or a congregation in significant ways. Community organizers often confront this problem. Do not be discouraged by it. See it as a constructive opportunity.

No magic formula. The situations described above are quite common. There is no instant formula to embrace that will solve the problem, because every situation is different. You need to assess your situation and see what needs to be done to move forward.

Re-organize your green team. Solidify the group working on greening the congregation. If there are only a few, that is fine. If you can expand the group at this time, that would bring in some new energy. Connect with people who already have different environmental interests, such as gardening or justice or nature. See if you can get a commitment to meet regularly, say every month, so that you can make some action plans and have accountability with follow-through.

Have an assessment meeting. Get the team together for a meeting designed to evaluate where you are. List what you have done. Identify problems. Put your finger on reasons why the efforts to green the congregation may have stalled. See if you can identify some strategies to address these reasons and move forward.

Avoid guilt. It is no help to feel guilty about what has not been accomplished or what has not succeeded. Guilt is not a helpful or a sustaining motivation for action. The idea is to be free to begin anew. Assessing your situation honestly is a good thing, but blaming yourself or others will not help you move forward. If you have failed, allow God to forgive you and then forgive one another. In future, be realistic with yourself and others about what you can and cannot do.

Address the problem of being overwhelmed. It may be that you are so overwhelmed by ecological problems and environmental crises that you have become disheartened and wonder if anything you/we do will make a difference. It is important to talk about this openly. Admit what you are feeling, and name the reasons why you are feeling this way. Acknowledge that what we do might not make the difference we would hope. Sometimes we are motivated by the hopeful outcome of what we are doing. But we are also called to be faithful regardless of results: to love creation for its own sake in response to God's grace, just as we may love our family and just as we are called to love our neighbor. Remember that changes come in an organic way: we keep sowing seeds and entrust the outcome to God.

Address discouragement about your congregation. It may be difficult to do the work of caring for creation if your congregation is in decline in terms of members or of finances. You may have had to cut back on pastoral staff. You may be in an interim situation between times of fulltime pastoral leadership. Other concerns may grasp the attention of the congregation. This can be an opportunity to be creative. Continue to work at engaging the congregation in earth-care. We don't stop caring for the sick or giving to the hungry even when under great stress. In whatever ways we can, we should also continue caring for creation.

You may be burned out. The goal of the green team is to stimulate other groups and committees in the church to embrace creation care, so that eventually everyone assumes ownership for this work in their own arenas of responsibility. However, sometimes the green team ends up doing all the environmental projects. Then you get tired from so much work and perhaps little support from others. Stop taking it upon yourselves. Strategize ways to engage the worship committee or the social

justice committee or the bible study group to integrate care for creation in what they do.

Go back to the roots. Know that it is our vocation as religious people to care for creation. Find some resources—biblical, worship, theological, and inspirational—that will help you as individuals and as a group to reconnect to God's love for creation. Seek inspiration to strengthen your own commitment and renew you for this work. Perhaps a meeting or retreat for the group that is completely oriented to finding our spiritual roots will be important. Get back in touch with the personal reasons for your commitment to care for creation.

Recapture the vision. The purpose of your efforts is to bring care for creation into the full life and mission of your congregation. The goal is that care-for-creation become not an add-on or the interest of a few but the mission and vocation of the whole community. One way to do this is to go back and read the Green Congregation Training Manual. Sometimes people consult the manual at first and then never go back to it. Or some team members may not have read it all. This might be a good time to make the manual available to all, to ask folks to read it all the way through, and then meet to consider next steps. The point is not to overwhelm people with more projects but to recapture the overall vision and be inspired by it.

Reconsider the needs. We learn every day about human degradation of the environment and of threats to nature and people. Talk about these threats to God's creation at a local, regional, and global level. Clarify why it is so important that we humans who have resources need to act urgently on behalf of the vulnerable people in the world and the vulnerable ecosystems of the world. Ecological justice demands it. Connect your work to a specific need or threat and make that connection explicit for your group and for others in the congregation.

Go around the road blocks. Sometimes there is resistance in the congregation to certain actions, say for example getting rid of Styrofoam cups at coffee time. If you hit a roadblock, move to other actions. Sometimes the energy of the congregation is taken up in something else. Then find ways to relate care for creation to the issue at hand or keep the creation-care vocation before the congregation as means to lay the groundwork for a time when the congregation can give more attention to this. Sometimes there is opposition or a lack of interest by some. Then work with those who are interested. The idea is this: If a roadblock is up, find a different route to get to where you want to go.

Maintain relationships with those who differ. Be open and listen to others who may disagree with what you are doing in the congregation as a green team. Do not be defensive. Honor other points of view and seek to understand them. About yourself, be confidently confessional and witness to your own perspective and commitments. At the same time, do not let others prevent you from expressing and acting upon your faith as part of the congregation. Continue to be open and continue to be transparent about your religious reasons for caring for creation as you do.

Consolidate what you have done. Sometimes communities will do things and then stop doing them after a while. Perhaps you have celebrated the Season of Creation in worship for several years and then for some reason stopped. See if you can reinstitute changes you have made and do what you can to make them long-term or permanent part of the congregational life—built into the stated mission or the task description of a committee or a regular part of the calendar of events for the congregation.

Celebrate what you have done. It is helpful to remind your selves and the congregation what you have done already as a way of solidifying the identity of the congregation as a Green Congregation. Put these things in the bulletin or announce them. If there is a measurable success such as monetary savings or a reduction of the carbon footprint or the amount of food that went from you community garden to a local food bank, this information should be widely known.

Have persistence. Persistence is a sign of a long term commitment. Care for creation is not a fad. It is an integral part of our human/religious vocation for life. Keep at it. One person, two or three, or more, can make an enormous difference if you keep going. Be contagious. Explain to others what

you are doing and why it is important for the congregation to embrace creation-care.

Know how important this work is. Remember that you are doing work that is critical for the life of the congregation and for the sustainable life of God's creation. The church exists for the sake of the world. So we are seeking to be part of a larger movement—an expression of God's grace and mercy in a world filled with suffering and struggle.

Know that you are not alone. Know that there are so many other congregations doing care for creation. Make contact with them. Check out the resources from your denomination. Find out what other denominations are doing. Follow the websites of the many faith-based groups working on the environment, perhaps in your geographical area, who can share your efforts. Find like-minded people and groups outside your congregation with whom to partner in your work.

Do what gives you energy. When you choose programs or projects, decide in terms of what will be fun and meaningful for you and the congregation. Some projects drain energy, while others seem to generate it. Either choose actions that are life-giving or find ways to carry out the projects in life-giving ways.

Do for others. Look around the community and notice the people or areas that would benefit from eco-justice commitment. You might plant trees in a suppressed area of the city. You might join in community supported agriculture on behalf of the farmers in your region. You might help to restore a habitat or to advocate for improved air quality in parts of the city. You may protest toxic causes of ill health in an urban area. You will garner energy in being oriented to the ecological needs of others.

Capture the joy. God delights in creation. Theologians have argued that delight in creation is the only appropriate basis for our human use of the life of the world. The whole earth is filled with God's glory. Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins refers to this as "the dearest freshness deep down things. And poet Wendell Berry celebrates "the fund of grace out of which we all live." We are called to love creation. But also God is loving us through creation. May we be grasped by this love and rejoice in it!