



Transformation Through Education

by David Rhoads

We underestimate the power of education if we think it cannot transform us. Remember some words you heard about life that you will never forget, an insight that has shaped so many of your subsequent attitudes and decisions in life. Just think about pieces of information you have gotten at one time or another that completely changed your mind about something and enabled you to see things in a new way... or recall how the learning of some skill or method opened up many possibilities for your life... or ask yourself how certain life experiences have "taught" you the capacity to cry or to wonder. Think of the story you heard or the novel you read or the magazine article that has led you to take a course of action or to take up some cause or concern in life.

How can learning about the environment transform us? I know many people who have been forever changed because of some insight that led them to see, in an instant, a whole new sense of relationship with the rest of nature and a sense of responsibility toward it. Many people can identify the words they heard or the life experience they had that turned them into someone who cares for creation. For some, it was learning about the extent of the effects that human activity is having on the planet. At first, they become overwhelmed by this information, but then they begin to see what we humans have to do to deal with it. Others are transformed by a re-reading of the Bible in a way that awakens their awareness of God's love for creation and our responsibility to care for this garden, earth. Still others are horrified by the human injustices that are always inextricably interwoven with our exploitation of earth and its resources.

As a result of learning, people are led to profound repentance, a turning around, an abandonment of attitudes and actions that are cavalier toward nature and an embracing of actions that tread lightly on the earth. Through an awareness of political decisions that erode our clean air or clean water, people are led to a stance of advocacy. A report of what is being done to address certain ecological problems leads to hope. Learning what difference our collective actions can make leads to a renewed sense of Christian vocation as we develop spiritual practices in our daily lives. In all of this, it becomes clear that education can transform us, and it can empower for action.

Part of the reason why we are not always transformed by learning is the simple fact that we do not expect to be changed. We think of education as adding on facts and information rather than learning ideas that will change our minds. We think of education as someone else's opinion, which we listen to as we think of rebuttals for our own point of view, rather than expecting to be altered by someone else's real life experience... or we think of education as passive activity in which a teacher pours facts into our heads, rather than the acquisition of insights that will subvert our present stance and that will generate new interests and activity. If we come to education with an open mind, expecting to be changed by what we learn, we will probably experience some of the transformation that learning promises; that the Christian tradition promises.

If we are to pursue education on the care of creation, we need teachers who have some commitment and resources to educating for transformation. These will be people who are themselves open to change in the very course of preparing to teach others! By a variety of means - lecture, discussion, stories, hands-on experiences with nature, inspirational anecdotes, proverbs and famous quotations, the creation of life experiences, and so on - teachers can change minds, strengthen convictions, evoke feelings of attachment to nature, enable people to be aware of things they never thought about before, awaken an experience of awe and reverence, empower for action, and foster a sense of solidarity with others who care for creation. It helps to be clear about the result you want to achieve: attitudes beliefs, values, actions, passion, advocacy. We can seek to teach in a way that will provide the best chance to bring about the outcome that will enhance our Christian vocations. The possibilities are endless, limited only by our capacity to see them. If we do not underestimate the possibilities for Christian education, but open ourselves to all that can happen as a result of learning, we can then quicken our imagination to think of new ways to teach and learn.

What do we need to learn about? There are many possibilities here. Do not plan to engage in all the possible learning activities that you may think of, at least not at once! Rather, take the opportunities to use your ideas at the place of the greatest interest or the most need for learning or the place you think will have the greatest impact. The subjects are many, and there are resources available for all of them: the principles of ecology and how to think environmentally; the state of creation at a local, regional, national or global level; what is being done to address the problems at these various levels; the connections between ecological degradations and human (in)justice; the biblical, theological and spiritual foundations for care of the earth; the place of humans in creation and our vocation to care for it; the actions that we can take and the practices we can adopt to care for the earth; and first-hand experience with the wonders of nature and the human threats posed against it.

Many of the examples which follow will be obvious ones, methods and approaches you have used before. However, if they are pursued in a new way with the expectation of change and transformation and action, they will also be new to you. In developing these possibilities, you may want to include elements of action and reflection in everything you do. Explain to people at the start that you want them to be open to change and action. Then, after the learning experience, ask how they may have changed their ideas or attitudes or beliefs or values as a result of the learning. Ask also what they may be led to do as a result of what they have learned. Then, at a later time, ask the same people to reflect on what difference their new attitudes and new behaviors have made on them and others and the world around them.

In spite of all this, hands-on experiences can be invaluable. Many doctors and therapists now believe that a positive relationship to the environment is an important part of health and well-being. More and more, people are being restored to health or discovering a balanced life or maintaining wellness in their life by communing with nature. Such a relationship cannot be a substitute for a relationship with God, but it can enhance a relationship with God and be a vehicle through which one experiences God. Direct experience with creation - both its wonders and its problems - can increase our sense of responsibility for creation.

Here are some practical ideas for creation-care education:

- **Forums**

- Many videos are now available from denominations and traditions, from the Union of Concerned Scientists, and from other groups committed to ecology and religion.
- There may be experts available in your area: science and technology, victims and social organizers, theologians and religious activists, people from local groups committed to ecology and religious, naturalists and biologists. Invite a local representative of an environmental organization, such as the Sierra Club.
- Discuss an article on the environment from a national magazine.
- Pose a question for discussion: What has our faith to do with the environment?
- Spend a session studying the statement prepared by your denomination on creation care and how people should live with the earth. (For a partial list of such statements, [see here.](#))
- Invite a local ecologist/geologist to talk about the development of the formations of your region and its future.
- Learn about environmental racism and its impact on your community.
- Learn what the ecological problems are in different countries and continents. Ask how your country may contribute to these problems.
- Learn about key local, regional, national legislation on the environment.
- Learn about global treaties to cooperate in addressing environmental issues.
- Invite people in your community from other countries who might be able to share environmental concerns in their place of origin.

- **Adult Education Classes**

- There are now many courses available from denominational headquarters, as well as from the National Council of Churches, on religion and ecology.

- There are now quite a few popular books on the environment and religion that would lend themselves to an adult class.
- There are also courses available on the internet; or, people could be encouraged to surf the internet and bring related findings to share.
- There are also some books available on the view of the Bible on creation (see the [Earth Bible page](#) for one example); or, you may want to study a series of biblical passages that talk about the earth/creation.
- There are materials to study the ecological state of the world, as well as course son global climate change and on health and pollution.
- There are study materials for a course on the Earth Charter, an international effort to state a common commitment to global problems.
- **Why not invite people to read and discuss a book?**
 - Theological studies suggesting new ways to think about God and the world in light of the concern for creation.
 - Ethics books, dealing with issues of justice related to environmental problems.
 - Ecology books, such as general treatments of the environment or the annual State of the World put out by the [Worldwatch Institute](#).
 - Eco-Justice Manuals for congregations.
 - Popular books on ecology, from Rachel Carson to Al Gore.
 - Books on the Spirituality of Place.
 - Novels (consider *Remembering Babylon* by David Malouf)
 - Poetry (consider the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins)
- **Hands-on experiences (action/reflection):**
 - Retreats: may be on opportunity for the governing board or a committee or other group to have a spiritual retreat at a site that enables the natural world to be an integral part of the retreat experience.
 - Arrange to visit a site in your area where nature has been degraded, such as a polluted stream or a brownfield. Meet with someone who is working on a restoration project. Get someone to give you an eco-tour of such sites in your area.
 - Join a group to restore a stream or prairie area, or to clean up a vacant lot for use a community garden.
 - Get a naturalist to lead you in a nature-focused exploration of the church grounds and the neighborhood or an interesting natural site near you.
 - Do an eco-tour of your building to see where you show earth-friendly practices and where you might change.
 - Visit an agency that works with eco-justice issues.
- **Sponsor people (establish a fund; source of inspiration; find ways to share with congregation what they have learned):**
 - Send delegates or representatives to conferences and workshops on congregational care for creation or eco-spirituality.
 - Provide scholarships for individuals or families to go to church camps for a week or a weekend which is focused on care for creation.
 - Offer a small grant for people to do a restoration project at home or at work.
- **Church library: display books and periodicals on key occasions (such as Earth Week) and remind people (via newsletters) what is available:**
 - Books
 - Periodicals
 - Curriculum material

- Videos
- **Material for children (available by denomination):**
 - Vacation church school programs
 - Sunday school curriculum
 - Children's sermons
 - Hands-on project about how to recycle at home
- **Youth**
 - Draw and build upon what children are learning in school
 - Find out what children think - and do! - about the environment
 - Find an environmentally-focused youth group project
 - Incorporate eco-justice education into the confirmation process
 - Retreats/camping outings with a naturalist
 - Church camp
 - Visit eco-sites
- **Elderly:**
 - Educational programs
 - Learn from groups such as the Gray Panthers
 - Discuss their concern for future generations
 - Engage in an environmental service project
- **Intergenerational:** retreats, church camps

In a sense, the entire life and activities of a congregation can be a source of education for environmental responsibility. The appearance of the church as an obvious place that cares for creation can itself be educational. Furthermore, all occasions can be an opportunity to educate: the use of personal mugs rather than styrofoam cups at meetings, the nature of the food and its preparation for communal meals, the practice of recycling bulletins at services, the choice of cleaning materials for church clean-up days, plans for building projects and so on. In this way, the building and the activities themselves become a learning laboratory for ecological responsibility.