

Green Congregation Program

Theological Reflections for the Training Manual

by David Rhoads

The training manual for the Green Congregation Program Training Manual is organized in six areas of actions: worship, education, building and grounds, lifestyle at home and work, and public ministry/ policy advocacy. As we consider and embrace these actions, we would do well to understand some theological grounds for our actions and decisions. The following reflections are organized around the five areas of the manual. They represent one perspective on these matters. As such they are meant to be conversation starters. Perhaps your committee can deal with a different one at each of your meetings. Or they can be the basis for an series of educational forums.

Reflection One

Transformation through Worship

Worship is the central recurring event in the life of a Christian community. Worship is a ritual. In ritual, we participate by immersion in a communal process that changes us by placing us in right relationship with God and with our fellow human beings. Worship is also an event. The call to worship, the proclamation of the Word, and the offer of Christ's body and blood in bread and wine are actions of God that generate changes in our lives. They are events by which we as a church are transformed and renewed.

It is in the gathered community at worship that we celebrate our life together and affirm our identity as children of God and followers of Jesus. Worship is the place where we can be transformed anew each week as we seek to return from the struggles and vicissitudes of life in the world to restore our spiritual and moral rooted-ness in the life of God. Worship is also a central place where we articulate our fundamental beliefs and values. Therefore our love of God's creation and our commitment to care for God's creation should play an integral role in our worship life.

Worship as Re-Orientation.

One way to look at worship is to say that it is the place where we can express with the larger community the Christian life we have nurtured at home and work throughout the week. Another way to look at worship is to say that it is about reinstating our proper place in relation to God, ourselves, and other people when we have had difficulty maintaining these relationships through the week. It is like being lost in the woods and then stopping to orientate ourselves to the directions by means of a compass and our nearness to the edge of the forest—and then finding our way home. It is like being lost at sea and then stopping to locate ourselves from the stars in the sky so that we know where we really are—and then returning to solid ground. It is like using a global positioning locator to know just where we are in relation to everything else—and then being moved into the right position. Worship is a matter of getting/keeping our bearings and being situated in our rightful place in the universe. In this process, it is important to emphasize that it is not we ourselves who get our bearings. Rather, we put ourselves into a position to allow God to give us our bearings, to restore us to our rightful relationships.

Restoring relationships with God and one another: Through the rituals and events of worship, we find ourselves restored to right relationships. Through worship we are oriented to wholeness and our true purpose in life by being brought back into proper relationship with God, ourselves, and others. For example, by praise of God, we restore God to God's rightful place in our lives as the one who created and sustains us. By thanksgiving, we recognize our human dependence on God for life and health. By confession and forgiveness, we seek to overcome our self-alienation and the brokenness of our relationships. By hearing the word of grace and challenge, we rediscover a proper sense of direction and our purpose in life. Through the offering, we give ourselves and our resources to this renewed vocation. Through prayer, we express a longing for all people who are lost or broken to be restored to a place of wholeness in relationship. By communing together, we return from alienation to a harmonious connection with others of the human community. With a blessing and a benediction, we go out with a renewed sense of who we are, where we are, and where we are going. We have become orientated. We have found our bearings, and we have reaffirmed who we truly are and whose we truly are—and, in so doing, we have found our home, our place of belonging in the world. Of course, it is our responsibility to seek to remain in these relationship from communal worship to communal worship.

Restoring our Relationship with nature. Unfortunately, our restoration/reorientation to place often leaves out an important and, indeed, crucial relationship. We reorient to God, self, and others, but often without restoring our relationship to nature. Yet nature is the web of life out of which we have come and where we will go. Nature is the inextricable matrix in which we live and move and have our being. We are a part of nature. Along with all other living beings and non-living things, we *are* nature. And if we are out of sorts with the rest of nature, if we are displaced from harmony with the creation of which we are such an integral part, if we are sinning against the natural world from which we ourselves have emerged, then we cannot fully find our bearings or our place.

If God created the world as a place in relation to which human life is inextricably woven, then we need to make the whole natural world an integral and important part of our worshipping experience. If worship is restoring ourselves to our proper place in the world—to recall who we are, where we have come from, the things upon which we depend, and that for which we are responsible—then worship must be a celebration of *all life* and an orienting of ourselves to our proper place within it. Nature can and should be such a fundamental dimension of the Christian life that we reflect the triad: Love God, Love your neighbor as yourself, and Care for creation.

Worshipping with Nature. To be fully into right relationship, we are called not only to restore our relationship with nature, but also to experience our *solidarity* with nature in relationship with God. That is, we humans are to worship and praise God *with* nature. Remember that the Psalms call for the hills to clap their hands and the trees to shout praises, along with animals and sea creatures, the seas and the soils, the trees and the grain—thus calling: “All creation, praise the Lord.” Hence, we can think about nature as our partners in worship. Nature itself is part of our worshipping community. It is important then that we are both in nature and with nature in our worship.

Worship as Counter-Cultural. Restoration to relationship with God, others, and nature is not the same as accommodation or assimilation into the society and culture around us. In fact, it may be quite the opposite. Reconciled relationships with God will orient us to values, actions, and structures that may go against the grain of the world around us. Reconciled relationships will place us in an alternative community that reflects the vision of God for human life. Reconciled relationships with others may set

us at odds with the injustices, oppressions, neglect, and discrimination of groups and individuals not sharing the values of the church. Similarly, reorienting ourselves to love of nature and care for creation may lead us to resist and oppose the practices of local and national government, businesses, corporations, and others who may contribute to the flagrant degradations of Earth's natural systems and life. Worship can be quite radical in its call for discipleship. Worship can be subversive of the culture and an expression of counter-cultural thinking and acting. It can lead us to advocate for public policies and laws that foster love of neighbor and care for creation. At the same time, our re-orientation in worship may lead us to affirm many movements and actions in the culture that further the values and behavior fostered by our Christian way of being in the world.

Care for Creation in Worship.

There are many ways in which we can enhance our experience of nature, our connectedness to it, our solidarity with it, and our advocacy for it. It is helpful to think about the elements of worship and the seasons of the church year as contexts for incorporating care for creation. Following here are some reflections about this process.

Elements of Worship. The rituals of worship can integrate the place of all God's creation with every part of worship and thus help to restore us fully to our place of health and wholeness.

- *Invoking the Presence of God:* We can name not just the church but the whole of creation as the sanctuary wherein we worship. "The whole earth is full of God's glory."
- *Call to Worship:* We can call to worship not only the human community but also we can invoke all creation as part of the worshipping community.
- *Praise:* In worship we can celebrate the wonder of creation and marvel at God's handiwork. We can praise the God who created the blue jay and the raccoon, the poplar and the gardenias, the mountain spring water and the rich soil of the field. There are many Psalms that celebrate creation. These Psalms also invoke the praise of all creation in worship of God.
- *Thanksgiving:* We can give thanks for the air we breathe and for the water we drink and for the provision of food—and for the beauty and majesty of it all. We can give thanks for the whole of nature upon which humans depend. We can delight in all plants and all creatures for their own sake. We dare not take the rest of nature for granted.
- *Hymns:* We can include hymns that express praise for God the creator and our relationship to the rest of nature. There are many traditional hymns as well as new hymns and hymnals that deal with the love of nature.
- *Litanies of confession:* We can confess the greed and indifference by which we humans have despoiled and exploited the earth and other human members of earth community. We can incorporate into our litanies some specific confessions concerning our pollution of water, our defiling of the air, our arrogant use of creation without respect and limitations.
- *Litanies of concern:* these can always include expressions of our longing for creation to thrive, as surely as we pray for peace among human creatures.
- *Declaration of Forgiveness:* We can seek pardon for our violation of the hills through mining or our degradation of the air and water through pollution or our threat to the ozone layer and to the species whose survival is uncertain because of our human actions or for the human contributions to the global warming that may change the cycles of nature upon which we have come to depend. We can acknowledge how our actions have affected vulnerable human communities. Forgiveness can free us to act out of compassion rather than guilt.

- *Scripture Reading and Preaching*: Through the Word proclaimed, we can announce the love of God for creation, the grace that God offers, and the mandates that God gives as means to address the eco-justice problems of our age. We can see the human harm we do when we exploit the earth, we can be reminded of the common graces of nature, and we can be summoned to the challenge to care for the Earth.

- *Prayer and Petition*: We can pray for the capacity for all God's creatures to thrive together on earth. We can intercede for endangered species, threatened eco-systems, and changing global conditions. We can grieve nature's losses and destruction. And we can pray for the courage and wisdom to act.

- *Offering*: In the offering, we can offer ourselves to the care and redemption of all that God has made—as agents of God to be guardians of nature, stewards of its resources, lovers of life, earth-keepers, and caretakers of the land.

- *Blessing*: We can go out from worship with a blessing to till and tend this garden Earth on which we “live and move and have our being.”

Hence, in order for us to be truly oriented by our worship, we can incorporate love for, celebration of, concern for, prayer for, and a commitment to care for all creation into each dimension of worship. If worship is a transformation restoring us to wholeness by restoring our proper relationships in life, then our relationship with the rest of nature needs to be an integral part of that power of worship to change us.

Care for Creation in the Seasons and Days of the Church Year. Also, each season of the year lends itself to the thematic development of our relationship with all creation:

- *Advent Season*: all creation groans together as we await redemption and restoration of all of life. Advent is a time to repent in preparation for a new age in which the leaves of the trees will be “a healing for the nations.”

- *Epiphany Season*: here we celebrate the manifestation and glory of God not only in the arrival of the Christ child but also in the light and glory present in the whole natural order of life.

- *Lenten Season*: During Lent, we recognize our complicity in sin, not only in relation to one another but also in our individual and corporate actions that have degraded the rest of nature. We grieve the losses to God's creation and reflect on the sacrifices we can make to stop our sins against creation.

- *Easter Season*: We celebrate the resurrection of human life and envision the restoration/ regeneration of all of life.

- *Pentecost Season*: We reflect on the spiritual wisdom we need and the actions we can take—as individuals, as congregations, and as a society—to live a life in which all human and non-human creation can thrive together.

- *Season of Creation*: We focus on God as creator and the wonders of creation, all designed to help us love creation as God does and commit ourselves to care for it.

- *Special Days*. here are many special occasions in the year when it is especially appropriate that care for creation becomes the focus of the whole service, such St. Francis Day and Rogation Day. There are also days in the life of the US culture for celebrating creation, such as Thanksgiving Day and Earth Day Sunday. Special services might include a Blessing of the Animals, a tree planting ceremony, the greening of the cross, among others.

In all of these seasons and days, there is the opportunity to include all of God's creation in our observances and celebrations. Seasonal decorations, banners, and sayings can keep this message before the congregation throughout the year. Furthermore, we can enhance the experience of worship to bringing nature into the sanctuary: worship outside, place greenery/flowering plants into the church,

give people seeds or seedlings to plant, decorate the sanctuary with natural art, and opening the sanctuary to natural light through windows and skylights. In all these ways, we can create an ethos in the congregation that will pervade worship with a care for creation and an experience of nature itself.

Sacraments.

The sacraments are occasions to reflect on human relationships with the rest of creation. Different Christian communities recognize different sacraments. We will reflect here on the two most common sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. The presence of an element of nature and the pronouncement of a word in relation to the offer of the element of nature assure us that the reality of Christ/God will be present in, with, and under the elements and the whole event, so that they are sacramental—capable of bearing the holiness and grace of God into our lives so as to transform us. We often focus on the symbolic meaning of the elements used in sacraments: water, bread, and wine. But in the context of our concern for the environment, we can focus on the elements themselves.

Notice how the status of grapes and grain and water as vehicles of the divine can in turn serve to give meaning to and to enhance our experience of these tangible realities of life for their own sake. For example, as a Eucharist or “thanksgiving,” Holy Communion can be an opportunity to express gratitude for all the natural order that sustains life at a material (and a spiritual) level, leading us to delight anew in the creation. To see the natural elements of both sacraments—water, grain, and grapes—as vehicles of grace is to realize that the finite can indeed bear of the infinite to us. This in itself elevates the goodness of nature as worthy and capable of being the means by which we establish a relationship with God and by which God establishes a relationship with us.

Baptism. Traditionally, baptism involves water for cleansing and for judgment or it symbolizes death and resurrection. However, what about also exploring the richness of the symbol of water in new ways in light of our contemporary knowledge and experience of water? We now know that water is the primordial context out of which life emerged and evolved to its present state. Why not connect this with the new creation at baptism? If baptism symbolizes a new beginning to life, then we can reflect on the new beginning to humanity that comes by immersing ourselves in water—so that we can, in a sense, re-emerge from water as a renewed humanity or as renewed life in all its manifestations—and in solidarity with all the life forms that led to human evolution.

Or could we not emphasize how vital water is to life—how our bodies are 90% water and we cannot live long without it? In this way, the water of life in baptism reinforces our gratitude for the water upon which we depend for life and health. Or baptism may remind us of how tragic it is to consider being baptized by water that is polluted rather than the pure living water that God created. Such a connection could lead us to see anew our vocation as baptized people to preserve clean water on the Earth. Or by baptism in water, we may acknowledge how much of the whole earth is comprised of water. In this way, the very fact that we are declared a child of God by immersion into nature itself can serve to get us in touch with our em-beddedness in nature as human beings. In all these ways we may re-connect the water of baptism to the water around us in nature.

The Lord's Supper. The sacrament of Holy Communion is another opportunity to realize how integral is our human em-beddedness in nature. In the Eucharist, we are using natural fruits of Earth as a vehicle for God's presence: wine from grapes and bread from grain. But it is more than that. Grapes grow from the vine that brings it forth, the ingredients of the soil, the water that nourishes the soil, the beetles that aerate the soil, the sun that shines on the plants, the air that surrounds the plant—and the

composition and the combination of these elements is unique to the particular area or region where the grapes are being raised. Add to these factors the wood from the trees used to make the barrels in which the wine was stored and the ingredients employed as fermenting agents. We can reflect in a similar way on the bread used for communion. Some congregations use organically-grown, whole grain bread. Some congregations use bread made of multiple grains originating from several continents. In these ways, the elements of the Eucharist get us in touch with all of nature.

In addition, the Eucharist is connected to all of life in another way. It is a reminder of the death of Jesus, a recollection that all of life is a cycle of living and dying and resurrection. This is not to reduce the particularity of Christ's death or the efficacy of it for salvation to the processes of nature. Rather, it is simply to recognize that the death of Jesus is an analog to the natural order in which death gives birth to life. The deaths of trees and other plants and the death of animals over the life span of the planet have made the earth into a great store of energy and one great compost heap that is the source of life and energy today.

The Sacramental Presence of God/Christ everywhere. Finally, it is important to observe that the elements of the sacraments are “common” elements of life—elements of food upon which we depend for life—assuring us that if God can be present in and through such common elements as bread and wine, then surely God is present to us everywhere in life. What difference does it make to our view of the daily food we eat and the daily drinks we drink knowing that bread and wine are sacramental? What difference does it make to our experience of water and soil and air, knowing that water is sacramental? The Eucharist is meant not only to lead us to experience the particularity of its symbolic meaning in the communion meal. It also leads us to think differently about all common elements of life—in such a way that our common experiences of them also become sacramental. That is, *all* elements of nature may convey for us the grace of God, that dearest freshness that lies deep down all things. As Martin Luther wrote, “God writes the Gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees and in the flowers and clouds and stars.”

When we see all of life as sacramental, it changes our relationship to and our responsibility for creation—concern for pure water, our desire not to waste food, the problems with pesticides on grain and grapes, and a host of other ecological problems to which humans have contributed. We re-dedicate ourselves in worship to stop our actions that degrade nature and to find ways to restore God's creation.

Preaching the Word.

Whether following a lectionary system or doing thematic preaching, here are some subjects that could and probably should be included in preaching: Human responsibility to care for the earth; Our proper human role/place in relation to the rest of creation; Our human degradation of creation; Reasons why we fail in our responsibility to care for creation; Reasons why we ought to care and act on our convictions; The inter-relationship between human justice and environmental problems; The scriptural connection between human sin and the languishing of Earth; Celebration of God as creator; Celebration of all of life for its own sake; The extent of human dependency on life around us; Gratitude for life; Exploration of Christian symbols that are rooted in nature; Connecting the sacraments to the realm of nature; New ways of thinking about God that foster our change of attitude and action; Proclamation of God's enduring grace in and through creation; The extension of the efficacy of Christ's death and resurrection to all life.

Personal Devotions.

It is important for Christians to incorporate their relationship with nature not only into corporate worship but also into their private devotional worship. We cannot depend on worship alone to rescue us each week from the fractured relationships that result from the vicissitudes of life. Rather, we are called to nurture and maintain our love of God, our love for others, and our care for creation on a daily basis. There are many resources available—devotional books, collections of prayers, poetry, selected scripture passages, exercises and experiences, among others—that can give our community members a daily experience of closeness to nature, the nourishments of its common graces, and the sense of responsibility for it that are so important in the world today.

Conclusion.

In order for us to be truly reoriented/confirmed by our worship, we should incorporate love for, celebration of, concern for, prayer for, and a commitment to care for all creation into every dimension of our worshipping experience. If worship is a transformation restoring us to wholeness by restoring and securing our proper relationships in life, then our relationship with the rest of nature needs to be an integral part of that power of worship to change us. Just as we cannot imagine worship without praise of God or prayer for those in need, so too we should not be able to imagine worship without expressions of our love for and our commitment to care for God's creation.

By immersion and by osmosis, the weekly connection with nature through words and symbols and ritual actions and the presence of nature itself in and around the sanctuary will work a salutary effect on the worshipping community. A transformation can occur that leads people to see our profound connection with all God's creation and that enables people to come to a place of renewed gratitude for nature and a sense of responsibility to care for creation as part of our vocation as humans and as God's people.

Reflection Two

Transformation through Education

It is absolutely crucial that education becomes an integral component in our efforts to become communities that care for creation. We cannot assume that people discern the urgent nature of the ecological issues. We cannot take for granted that they understand the dynamics of global warming or the deterioration of the ozone layer or the loss of biological species. We cannot assume that people will see how some biblical interpretations and some theological points of view have in fact been contributing to the mentality that degrades the Earth. Nor can we expect that most of us to be aware of the ways in which our own actions, choices, and lifestyles have an impact upon the well-being of creation. Learning about these things is essential to becoming part of the movement in the church to care for the earth. We must learn how these things work, why they are important, how we need to think, what we need to do, and how we need to do it

The Power of Education

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 or 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. Try to take in the accumulative impact of teachers and Sunday schools programs that cared about you and taught you basic things about life that inform the way you live today.

Add to this the influence of Jesus in his role as teacher—offering such unforgettable sayings and such memorable proverbs, telling parabolic stories that led people to think in entirely new ways, and offering insights with life-changing reflections on morality and our relationship with God. Jesus fulfilled the role of a sage—sharing unconventional wisdom that challenged the core values and the common ways of his audiences. Jesus’ words were actions that produced results. They were events that opened up new worlds for those who had ears to hear. Jesus the teacher has been the model for so many Christian teachers to follow and so many of the educational programs of the church—as means to create and train faithful disciples.

Learning as Transformation. 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 may become overwhelmed by this information, but then they begin to see what we humans have to do now to change this human activity. 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 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 us 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 activities. If we come to education with an open and a ready mind, expecting to be changed by what we learn, we will probably experience some of the transformation that learning promises to bring—transformation that the Christian tradition promises to bring us!

Teachers of Transformation. If we are to pursue education on the care of creation, we need teachers who have the commitment and the resources to educate 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 results you want to achieve: attitudes beliefs, values, actions, passion, and advocacy. In this way, we can seek to teach in a way that will provide the best chance to enhance our Christian discipleship. 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.

The Curriculum.

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 all at once! Rather, take the opportunity 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 best 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
- First-hand experience with the wonders of nature

- First hand experience of the human threats posed against nature

In developing these possibilities, you may want to include elements of “action and reflection” in what 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.

Methods of teaching/learning. There are many approaches to style and method of teaching. We tend to think of lecture as the main means to present ideas. Here the expectation is that the lecturer knows and the listeners are learning. But there are many ways to de-center the teacher and engage everyone as learners. What about quotation/reactions, in which the leader provides some provocative passages from important books and authors and then invites the group to discuss their responses to them? What about asking participants to take different sides of a debate about the environment, for example, in a conflict between species-preservation and job-preservation? Or consider a book-talk, in which all participants read the same book and take turns leading the discussion. You could assign a different biblical passage to each participant and ask them to come to the next meeting prepared to share their reflections on it. Guest speakers or a panel of folks can be stimulating. Or ask a guest to do a demonstration, such as how to compost food scraps. Showing slides with time for reactions—say of the effects of global warming or a catalogue of endangered species—can be very illuminating. Each of these might take some preparation and planning, but they open up the means of learning to include/engage the whole class and at the same time give everyone responsibility for their own learning. Even though some methods may already be familiar to people, if they are pursued in a new way with the expectation of change and transformation and action, they will be a fresh means to learn and grow. Be imaginative!

Education for all ages. It is important to think about a curriculum for all ages—from the youngest to the eldest and all together. Intergenerational experiences can be very important, in which the wonder of childhood can be brought together with the wisdom of age. After all, the whole point of our caring for creation is for us to leave this planet for the next generation at least as healthy as previous generations entered it. It is so important to teach the children—in Sunday school, at worship, in vacation church school experiences, and at home. Often, it is the youth who bring their parents to awareness and to a change of behavior. We can build on the experiences children are having in their school ecology programs. There are many hands-on programs for the youth of the congregation, programs that make a significant environmental difference for the church or the community. Summer youth programs and support for youth to go to church camps can also be a means to generate “earthkeepers.” Adult programs of education can take many form—forums, classes, book studies, field trips, retreats, workshops, and so on. Incorporating creation-care into the programs and opportunities for the elderly are so crucial for drawing upon the advice and energy of retired folks in this crucial work.

Collaborative teaching and learning. It is always helpful to have partners in teaching and learning. Consider several people teaching a class together. The impact of the learning on others will be greater. The learning will be enhanced by the mutual relationships. And the message is given that no one of us has all the answers. Only together can we gather the wisdom necessary for the environmental tasks before us. Or consider cooperative learning projects. Could we not ask two or three people in a class to investigate something together—local pollution, a nearby agency that restores habitats, the benefits of

getting rid of Styrofoam, the trees that could be planted on the church property, or other such matters of interest to the work of the congregation—and report back the next class time. Any time we engage people in the learning process, people take responsibility in a new way for what they have learned and for what they need to do about what they have learned. Collaborative teaching and learning is effective teaching and learning.

Teaching Moments. Many opportunities that arise can serve as “teaching moments.” Look out for them. They may be related to actions and decisions of the congregation: time to purchase coffee for the coffee hour, approval of the budget, the appointment of a new worship committee chairperson, the need to repaint several rooms, or spring clean-up. All these moments represent opportunities to make changes in purchases and practices—along with the opportunity to learn why it may be important to do things a different way. Some of the teaching moments may come from outside the congregation: the latest news about global warming, some legislation on the docket related to protection of species, a new book on ecological theology, a statement on care for creation from a national church, a local news item on environmental injustice, or an article in a popular magazine. Any of these can provide educational opportunities about care for the Earth before the congregation—in forums, classes, newsletters, prayers, and conversations. Education is not always prescribed by a curriculum. Sometimes, the best learning takes place in those opportune times when the situation is ripe for learning.

Experiential Learning. Hands-on experiences can be invaluable. Education is not just ideas and mental learning. It is also a matter of experience. One approach is to see for oneself the ecological devastation human beings are doing to nature. Members can arrange a field trip to local habitats such as polluted streams, lost prairies, industrial waste sites, non-regulated factories, and places of logging and strip mining. You can talk with people in neighborhoods with high cancer rates or a high percentage of lung ailments. You can see the effects of urban sprawl. At the same time, it can be a wonderful experience to visit projects of habitat restoration, community organizations that challenge our current lifestyle, or a tour of businesses that have “greened” their practices. Furthermore, many doctors and therapists now believe that a personal relationship with nature 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. Ask any group of ten people, and most if not all will be able to relate a special experience in nature when they felt close to God. Such direct experiences with creation—both its wonders and its problems—can also increase our sense of solidarity with creation, our responsibility for creation, and our willingness to advocate to protect it.

Discipleship Training

Sometimes, the efforts suggested above can seem scattershot, doing one thing here and another thing there. What might give the educational program some coherence and increase its impact would be to organize these programs in such a way as to foster a sense of discipleship among members. A sequence of educational opportunities would give a sense of growing understanding and commitment among members. Another strategy might be to invite people to join a small group with a commitment to care for creation in an intentional and comprehensive way—and to learn the information, skills, and actions that would enable them to do this. It may be that a group of people would be willing to go through a

year-long training process in which together they learn about the environmental state of the world, ecological justice, biblical roots of care for creation, theological concepts, a spirituality of place, and practical choices at home and work. Perhaps those who have gone through such a program might then become leaders of further groups in the congregation, so as to develop a network of earth-keepers across the congregation.

Conclusion

The idea of all these efforts is to incorporate care for creation into the educational programs of the church so thoroughly that it becomes part of the ethos of the life of the congregation. 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 a place that obviously 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/grounds and the activities themselves become a learning laboratory for ecological responsibility. In the end, the atmosphere of the life of the congregation becomes one in which people *naturally* assume attitudes and take responsibility for celebrating creation and caring for it.

Reflection Three

Building and Grounds as Model

Christians are earthy. We have great understanding of the harsh realities of life and great appreciation for the common graces of world around us. We believe in God who created this material world. We believe that what God created was good. We affirm the importance of gratitude and responsibility for all that God created. We believe that the finite can bear the infinite, that the ordinary elements such as grapes and grain and water—and therefore any matter—can actually be vehicles for us to experience divine realities. We hold material reality in high estimation. We know that we love God and are loved by God through our relationship with our neighbor. We also know that we love God and are loved by God through our relationship with the rest of nature, through our love of and care for the creation. So let's get earthy. Let's talk concretely about our commitment to care for the church building and grounds—the bricks and paints and chairs and soil and grass and trees—as part of our Christian, indeed human, commitment.

The Church as Alternative Community.

Ideally, the physical plant of the parish and its grounds should serve as a model for ecological responsibility. This concept of model is rooted in the vision of the church as an alternative community. In contrast to an understanding of the church that fits into the culture around us, we argue for an understanding of the church that would make the church a model for an alternative way of life. If the society believes we can use pesticides without harming people, the church will face up to such a denial of responsibility and do something about it. If the society is willing to put comfort and ease above the need to limit emissions that increase global warming, the church will seek earth-friendly alternatives. If the society believes that we can be a “use and waste” society, the church will seek to approach 100% recycling/reuse of its waste. The contrasts can be proliferated further, but the point is clear. The church will make moral and theological reflections on its ecological responsibilities and then choose to be a community that is alternative to the prevailing popular wisdom.

The theology of an alternative community asks what it would mean to make our lifestyle sustainable for future generations. It would be based on the ecological principle that “everything is connected to everything else.” Our ecological choices affect others, especially the most vulnerable among us both locally and in the larger global community. Injustices against the vulnerable now also include injustices against the rest of nature—the endangerment of animal species, the exploitation of animals, the rape of earth for ores and metals, the stripping of land for trees, the destruction of ecosystems, the pollution of air and water, and much more. Yet our commitment is not limited to the rest of nature or even to the people presently alive who are affected by ecological injustice. Our ethical commitments extend to those who will be living on this planet many generations from now.

Our society tends to have short-term plans, many lasting only as long as the next election. But we can no longer afford to follow that trend. We have to be visionary about establishing a style of life that will preserve the planet from actions and behaviors that would jeopardize the lives of millions of people who will be alive fifty years or a hundred years or more from now. We can longer be cavalier about the effects that our behavior will have on future generations. We

need alternative communities that show us what it will take for humans to live in such a way that they secure the future of the planet for our great, great, great, great grandchildren.

Our hope is that as an alternative community, others will see the wisdom of what we do and emulate it. The goal is for the whole society and for humanity as a whole to carry on in a way that is sustainable for the whole planet, a lifestyle that will enable our ecosystem—Earth—to sustain us for the long haul and that will provide food and well-being for all. Even if such a lifestyle seems far off, for us it is only as close as our next set of decisions and actions. As an alternative community, we are not waiting around for others to take the lead so we can follow along. Rather, we have a commitment to act unilaterally—whether others follow suit or not. We cannot be sure it will be effective, but we know it is the right thing is to do and so we will do it—regardless of the lack of action or the failed commitment of others.

A Prophetic Witness

In this regard, a theology of alternative community will be prophetic. We believe that the whole society will have to change if we are going to have a lifestyle that is sustainable. But are there any communities that show us what this lifestyle might be like, say, fifty years from now? What if we imagined what the building and grounds of a congregation might be like fifty years from now when the whole society is oriented toward ecological sustainability? What characteristics might a church in that society have? Imagine this:

- The building itself is made of predominantly recycled materials and has furniture that is made from recycled materials and certified wood. The carpets and fabrics produce no toxic emissions. The building is insulated and designed for conservation of energy, including the use of natural light and heat.
- The building uses renewable energy such as wind and geothermal energy, with the result that there is no further exploitation of resources and no green house emissions.
- The lawn is a grass mixture that requires little water and less maintenance. Mowing is done by hand or by solar powered mower. No harmful pesticides or herbicides are used. The parking lot has a permeable surface and appropriately placed trees.
- Trees next to the building moderate the temperature inside the building. The flat roof has a rooftop garden for conserving energy.
- There is a large community garden on the property to provide food for local food banks. A small apple orchard stands on a side lot. Drainage and a collection system gather rainwater for use in watering the garden, the orchard, and the plants inside the church. The back lot has been restored to natural prairie. There is a little tree stand with benches around a labyrinth.
- The church itself is designed to overcome the distinction between inside and outside, with some floor-to-ceiling windows and the same plants inside and outside. Plenty of natural light in the building allows plants to grow in the sanctuary and elsewhere in the building.
- Only post-consumer paper products are used in the building—for the bathroom, the kitchen, the office, and packaging. There are office guidelines for the thorough use of paper. Most transactions are electronic.
- The community seeks to minimize garbage. Garbage is carefully analyzed to enable as much as possible to be recycled—paper, packaging, cans, bottles, plastic, batteries, computer equipment, cell phones, plastic bags, and so on. All items that can be reused are reused, either within the church or through donation to an appropriate charity—furniture, clothing, building materials, and so on.
- Cleaning/ maintenance products are safe and free of toxins. All toxic products that cannot be avoided are disposed of properly.

- The kitchen has a mug rack (in place of paper or Styrofoam cups), uses cloth napkins and tablecloths, has high-efficiency appliances, and cleans dishes and napkins with non-toxic detergents.
- Coffee hour serves fair trade coffee, juices, fruit pieces, and whole-grain muffins and cookies.
- There are gentle reminders everywhere for people to turn off lights, close doors, recycle, use paper fully, and conserve water.
- There is a bicycle rack to encourage those who can to cycle to church. Bus routes are posted at church. Carpooling is encouraged, with sign-up sheets available in the narthex. The youth check tire pressures of the cars in the lot and alert the members when pressure is low.
- The building is flexible for use as a gathering place for worship and a neighborhood center for the community. The church works with the community to address questions of eco-justice and to make the surrounding area a safe and attractive place to live.
- You can add other ideas of your own about an eco-justice parish of the future!

Once we have this vision of the future, we can begin to live it out, *now*, in the present. That is what it means to be prophetic. We are called to be ahead of our time, to be prophetic about what all of society needs to become and can become. Insofar as we are capable of enacting as much of this vision as possible, the future becomes the present and we are living a community that is a counter-cultural alternative out of the future. How many of the things listed above (among other suggestions) could we make happen now, in the present? For the most part, they require resources of time and effort. But the main ingredient is the willful commitment to do them. With the determination to carry these things out, many, if not most, could probably be done now.

The goal for the church as an alternative community is to live out our responsibility to creation in a radical, thoroughgoing way as a prophetic sign to the culture of what the whole of humanity needs to do if we are to sustain life for the future. As an alternative community we are called to live life as a model for the world. Unfortunately, for most moral advances in the world, the church has been behind the society. In matters of racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism, for example, the church was dragged into the modern world. Can we take action about the environment in such a way that we will *lead* people into a new era at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Here is our opportunity to do it!

A Theology for Buildings and Grounds

So we have a theology of the church as an alternative community, but what does it mean to have a theology for the buildings and grounds? Despite our “earthiness” as Christians, we are used to thinking of theology and ethics in relation to other people, but we are not used to thinking of a theology of physical realities like building projects or choices of furniture or property maintenance. True, when new churches are built, we think about the theology of the design of the sanctuary: is it in the shape of a cross? Does it invite participation? Is the sanctuary oriented around the baptismal font or the Eucharistic railing? Is the altar in front or at the center? What will be the theme of the stained glass windows? And so on. These are important questions; yet they only begin to reflect the theological and ethical choices around the building and its use and the landscaping of its grounds.

When we realize that buildings are not neutral, that they have an impact on the environment, and furthermore that the environment has an impact on people, then we know that *every* choice we make has implications for our responsibility to care for the Earth and all creatures who inhabit Earth—humanity included. If there is remodeling or construction on the site, how will the discarded materials be made available for recycling or reuse? Will the building

materials be made locally or will they be hauled long distances by truck or train, with significant expenditure of energy? Will the building be made of recycled materials? What will the insulation level be? What about the tightness of the building? How much natural light will be available? What will the placing and energy efficiency of the lighting be like? How about the efficiency of the furnace and the air conditioner? Will alternative energy sources be employed? Will the paint used or the fabrics for chairs or the carpets give off toxic emissions? What about the use of native grasses and plants, which require less maintenance? All these choices—and many others—are ethical choices that have implications for the environment and for human justice, all of which determine whether your congregation will leave a heavy or light ecological footprint on the Earth.

A theology of buildings and grounds would be based on the ecological principle that “everything is connected to everything else.” It would be rooted in the sacredness of all of life as God’s creation. In short, it would be based on the sacramental nature of all life. We would realize that the whole earth is our sanctuary, not only but including our church building! If the whole Earth is our worshipping sanctuary, that fact leads to a different relationship with nature and to a different ethical responsibility toward Earth-community. And such a theological proposition would be followed by the human responsibility to be *aware* of our impact on all God’s creation. Therefore, it would include the commitment to care for God’s earth in all our decisions and practices. It would include the commitment to provide and maintain buildings and grounds that sustain life and do not deplete it. It would also include a commitment to eco-justice where choices have a positive and not a negative impact on the human community—locally and globally.

Thinking Comprehensively: Church Property as a Green Zone

If we are to become morally responsible, if we want to make the church property and practices into a “green zone,” a safe area for the environment, then we must be comprehensive in our understanding of the aspects of the building and grounds that have an impact on the environment. Otherwise, you may get the notion that if you have done one or two things, then you have “greened” the church—retrofitting the lights or eliminating Styrofoam cups or recycling bulletins or doing an energy audit. By contrast, a comprehensive model will enable the congregation to see specific changes within a larger vision of what the building and grounds *as a whole* can become.

One way to think comprehensively is to do an environmental inventory. This is similar to an energy audit, and indeed it includes an energy audit, but it covers everything of ecological concern—anything in/on the building and grounds, including the practices of people who gather there that make an impact on the environment. The idea is to think of the property of the church as a “Green Zone,” an area that is creation-friendly. In this green zone, we seek (1) to identify everything that comes into/onto the buildings and grounds (in order to minimize harmful things from entering); (2) to assess how efficiently everything is used when in/on the building and grounds (to make sure nothing is wasted); and (3) to identify where everything goes when it leaves the zone (in order to reuse, recycle, minimize waste, and dispose of waste safely). Here is a checklist of things to consider:

- **Everything that comes onto the property.** Here we are aware that we can avoid bringing some things in (pesticides) and minimize other things (packaging, etc.). Here is a checklist:
- Natural lawn care products rather than pesticides or herbicides

- Environmentally safe cleaning products rather than toxic cleaning products
- Environmentally safe dishwashing/laundry powder or soap
- Limit gas for powering lawn mower, snow blower, or other machinery
- Recycled/post-consumer waste paper for office paper, bulletins, newsletters
- Recycled/post-consumer waste paper for towels, toilet paper, napkins
- Less electricity for lighting or powering appliances
- Natural sunlight rather than energy for artificial lighting
- Alternative energy sources:
 - Wind power,
 - Solar power (eternal light),
 - Geothermal power
 - Solar powered lawn mower
- Water
 - Rainwater
 - Well water
- Limit packaging and eliminate Styrofoam cups/paper cups/ paper plates/napkins

- **The efficient use of resources in buildings and on grounds.** Make use of the most efficient appliances and make the most thorough use of products.
 - Use mixture of lawn grass that requires the least maintenance
 - Mow lawn less often
 - Clean less often
 - Use church bus to bring some to church
 - Carpool as a service to elderly or children
 - Partner in order to carpool to church
 - Ride bikes to church
 - Use all products completely before purchasing new ones.
 - Use both sides of paper for drafts or notes
 - Use electronic messaging and communications where feasible (newsletter)
 - Use blow dryers rather than paper towels
 - Use cloth napkins rather than paper napkins and tablecloths
 - Use mug rack rather than Styrofoam cups
 - Insulation of doors and windows
 - Insulating curtains on windows
 - Boiler adjustments to lower gas/oil use
 - Climate control at different times of day and in different parts of the building
 - Insulation in walls
 - Turn down water heater
 - Turn down thermostat for heat
 - Turn up air conditioning level
 - Use most energy-efficient air-conditioning units, dishwaters, refrigerators, water heaters, and so on.
 - Retrofit lights to lower energy use
 - Use upgraded fluorescent lighting to lower energy use
 - Disconnect lighting where more light is provided than is needed
 - Automatic lighting with motion sensitive switches for bathrooms and elsewhere
 - Encourage the practice of turning off room lights when not in use
 - Produce your own air purity with plants
 - Use rainwater for lawn, garden, and indoor plants
 - Efficient operation of machinery for least use of gas or oil

- Use hand power for shoveling or trimming and mowing where feasible
- **Everything that goes out of the building.** Here, aim for reuse or recycling or for safe disposal. The idea is to work toward 100% recycling of disposable materials. Examine your trash to find out where you can do better. Work with local agencies to find the best places to recycle products.
- Recycle office paper, bulletins, church school materials, art materials, newsprint
- Recycle plastic, aluminum, glass, tin, and so on
- Toxic recycling and disposal
- Recycle oil from machines, recycle batteries
- Use care in discarding paints
- Hold a clothing drive to reuse clothing and other items

Do not be overwhelmed by this model. Do not try to do everything at once. Take one or several things at a time. Do what you can do and celebrate that! Some simple things can be done with little cost. More complex things can be done with minimal cost. Consider things with no cost or things with an initial cost that bring a payback. Do not limit yourself just to what is financially profitable. Make an assessment for each thing you consider, an assessment that includes both financial and environmental costs and savings. There are always tradeoffs; yet everything we do for the environment is an investment in our future. Consider doing some things that are prophetic. They will help to give you an identity that will lead to other things.

Public Blessing

As a community, consider your commitment and your practices as a spiritual discipline. Do Earthkeeping with joy and care. Do not fret about what does not get done. Rather, celebrate what does get done and take pleasure in your choices to be thoughtful and committed to justice in your behavior. Know that you are carrying out the biblical mandate to “serve and to keep” the Earth. Know that each choice and each change of practice makes a difference—both in your own spiritual life and in the larger world around you.

When you make changes in the church and its buildings and grounds, be sure to have a rite as part of a worship service in order to celebrate what you have done and to seek God’s blessing on your work. The public acknowledgment will help to solidify the identity of the parish as a community that cares for creation and will perhaps inspire other faith groups and secular organizations in your community to follow suit. And as you carry out these commitments in the parish, you will also be serving as a model to your own members—to make similar changes in their own lifestyles at home and at work.

Conclusion

It is not enough for us to talk the talk in our care for creation. We must also walk the walk. It is not enough to be transformed through worship or transformed by education, we must act in ways that truly make a difference in our world. There are very serious and urgent problems that we are addressing—global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, the loss of species diversity, the proliferation of waste, to name a few. We can and must take concrete actions to address these realities. As alternative communities, congregations can lead the way. They can become flagship organizations that others can look to and *see* the possibilities. The way forward will involve difficult decisions and hard sacrifices. Such an adventure will entail thinking in new ways and trying things that others may not understand. But the investment in the future of God’s creation will be well worth the effort. Think differently! Think comprehensively! Act accordingly!

Reflection Four

Discipleship at Home and Work

The nurture and support we get from worship and education with our Christian community is ultimately meant to empower us for life in the world. Worship and education are designed to renew and reorient us to the kinds of relationships that will enable us to live the life God would have us live in our daily existence—to love our families and our neighbors, to do our work with honesty and integrity, to be committed to justice, to be honorable citizens of the country and the world, and to care for creation.

Simple Lifestyle.

The United States is a materialistic culture that drives us to take many things for granted. We believe that our happiness depends on many possessions. Many of these possessions are luxuries. We believe that bigger is better—house, cars, televisions. We will buy many things that make our lives easier. As we are able, we purchase a host of products that serve efficiency, even though they may harm the environment. Just as the economy is based on unlimited growth, so also do we base our personal lifestyle on unlimited growth. We assume that if we have money, we have the moral right to spend it on whatever we want, regardless of the impact on others or the environment. We believe we should be able to get our goods cheap, despite the fact that those goods may be made by people receiving non-living wages and under conditions that destroy natural resources.

We seldom call these beliefs into question or consider an alternative set of values by which to live. The commitment to care for creation leads us to challenge these cultural assumptions and to embrace a lifestyle that is committed to justice for people and care for the earth. No longer can we afford to be ignorant of the impact of our lifestyle choices on others and on the Earth. No longer can we turn a blind eye to the consequences of the things we buy or the practices we carry out. We now need to learn where our purchases come from and what happens as a result of our lifestyle.

The opportunity to purchase some “fair trade” products reveals the difference. Most coffee you purchase from the store or from a coffee shop is made in places outside the United States where the laborers are paid as little as possible, the land is stripped of trees and shrubbery, pesticides and herbicides are used to maximize the crop, and there are many “middle people” between the crop and the buyer. By contrast, fair trade coffee is made under conditions where the workers form a cooperative, they are paid a living wage, the trees and shrubs are preserved and actually serve to fertilize the land on which the coffee grows, the use of pesticides is kept to a minimum, and there are few “middle men” to add unnecessary cost. One may pay a little more for fair trade coffee, but we have done an act of justice and we have saved the terrible long-term costs on the Earth from short-term profits. What we need is the choice of fair trade products not just for coffee and tea and chocolate but *for everything we purchase*. Better yet, all products should be produced under fair conditions that honor workers and respect the Earth. While we are not there as a culture, we nevertheless need to make the decisions we are able to make now—as a counter-cultural act designed to express our Christian convictions and to witness to the possibilities of creating a new and different world.

The concept that seems to have taken hold among Christians is to choose a lifestyle that reflects “simple living.” Many resources are available—books, courses, alternative products,

group activities, packets—all designed to give us directions to adopt a lifestyle that is equitable toward others who have less and that minimizes our destructive impact on the Earth. What follows are some reflections on what it might take to embrace a lifestyle of simple living and what actions and choices we might make to carry it out.

Home and Work.

In a sense, care for creation “begins at home.” Home is where we tend to be ourselves. We show our true colors there. Few others will observe what we do at home. For that reason, our homes present the greatest challenge to our commitment to care for creation. There are many people who have a public commitment to the environment who never apply it to their own house and property. They do not put their private commitments—money, time, effort, and daily practices—where their public commitments are. If we can show our Christian commitment to care for creation in our own home, we have come a long way toward establishing environmental integrity with habits that will last a lifetime.

Often we are prevented from doing things at home because we think the things we do in our homes are so small and insignificant as to make no difference in the larger scheme of things. We might say to ourselves: What difference does it really make to turn the heat down a few notches or the air conditioning up a few notches? What difference does it make whether we mow the lawn with a power mower or a push mower? How could it matter that we eat fish rather than beef? Why bother to recycle products we have to take to a recycling center when it will not change the big picture? What is the measure of difference that we pay more money for a car that has gas mileage or an appliance that is more energy efficient? And so on. When we see so many other things happening where the effects of pollution are huge, we become discouraged.

Small efforts add up. But we *do* make a difference. Many small actions on the part of many, many people can amount to a tidal wave of difference. And these small actions can provide the conditions for other, more dramatic actions to take place in the culture. We need to learn to act unilaterally and to resist becoming discouraged. Scientists and environmentalists in the secular world often look to the churches to make a difference, because religious communities are the largest, most extensive grass roots organizations in the country.

Some years ago, I came to understand the importance of small efforts when Stan Hallett, a Chicago environmentalist, used the analogy of the destruction wrought by Mount St. Helen’s volcano. Here is what he said:

When the volcano blew, it destroyed all animal and plant life for miles around. The whole area was absolutely decimated. There was no sign of life whatsoever. Then little by little the flora and fauna progressively began to return. Here’s how it happened. First, the moss came back, and the moss created the conditions for the lichen to grow. Insects and beetles appeared. When the lichen returned, that created the conditions for the shrubbery to grow. The shrubbery returned, and that created the conditions for the aspen trees to begin to grow again. And the animal life returned. In a similar way, all the small efforts we make at the grass roots level are like the moss, creating the conditions for greater things to happen, which create the conditions for wider changes to happen at the local level, which in turn create the conditions for even more extensive changes to take place at the level of corporations and governments.

Thus, even with small efforts, we are an important part of a broad movement of regeneration, indeed a process of resurrection, which is taking place among us. And we must be sure to do our part, so that we may once again, this time with passion and with action, dedicate ourselves to the care and redemption of all that God has made.

It's the Right Thing to Do. But even if it did not seem to make a large difference, is that any reason not to do it? Compare our common attitude to love and justice. What if we said, why bother to do small acts of kindness, because in the larger scheme of things it does little to stem the tide of evil and injustice in the world. No, we say that every act of kindness is valuable in itself. We can make a difference in people's lives. And, besides, in the end, you never know; a small act of kindness may have a larger ripple effect or combine with the kindnesses of others to reach a threshold of transformation. And whether it is small or large, it matters because people matter. Besides, our actions and commitments help create "the people we are," quite apart from the results of our actions.

Can we not transfer such attitudes to our care for God's creation? Small or large, the things we do matter, because nature matters, because life forms are affected by the choices we make, because humans are profoundly affected by the changes that take place in the environment. And the disciplined actions we take "to serve and to preserve" the Earth shapes us a people who care about life. Can we not embrace a concern for the environment that matches our commitment to love people and to do justice for people? Can we not love God, love our neighbor, and care for the Earth, and do it just because it is the right thing to do—whether or not it "works"?

Caring for the earth is an expression of our love for God. It is a spiritual discipline, a discipline to do no harm, to foster life rather than death. There is something compassionate about caring enough about people and nature that we attend to things in a careful, care-filled way. We learn what harm our actions can bring, and we seek to minimize that harm and promote the health of the planet. Such a spiritual discipline involves a deep connection with earth and trees and animals and flowers and plants and the sun, soil, and air—such a deep connection that we want to conserve its goodness and beauty and usefulness. Our care for nature comes from our love of nature, just as our care for people is rooted in our love of people. When we act to enable fish to thrive in a lake rather than be damaged by pollution, we love these creatures of the sea for their own sake—empowering fish to praise God by being fish and doing what fish were created to do and to be.

Home as Green Zone. When we think about the actions we can take as a spiritual discipline in our homes and at our work, it is salutary to realize that we can make decisions that directly affect every aspect of the environmental crisis. We often think our homes are insulated from nature because we are inside! We forget the environmental impact of our homes. But look! Our homes are directly connected to every dimension of the environmental crises and the ecological concerns that we face. Just think about what comes into our homes and what goes out of our homes.

- Electricity lines come into our homes from coal-burning plants.
- Water pipes bring increasingly limited fresh water from filtration plants
- Gas pipes bring in natural gas from distant places
- Sewage lines take water and waste out to sewage processing plants.
- Chimneys release carbon dioxide from the furnace into the atmosphere

- Food in the refrigerator has traveled by truck from great distances
- Food has been raised using pesticides and chemical fertilizer
- Meat we eat may be raised at the top of the food chain
- Paper and Wood for furniture depletes the forests
- Garbage trucks take garbage to land fills, perhaps including also toxic waste.
- Cars in the driveway burn gasoline and use oil and emit pollutants into the air
- Lawn mowers and other machinery emit pollutants into the air
- Air-conditioning emits chlorofluorocarbons that erode the ozone layer
- Pesticides and herbicides used on the lawn get into the air and water and soil
- Leather chairs and shoes can be traced to cattle ranches in California or Brazil
- Cleaning products—from laundry detergent to window washing fluid with toxic substances—that pollute the air and water.
- And the list could go on.

The point is that the choices we make every day in our homes and on our property directly affect global warming, ozone deterioration, air pollution, water pollution, depletion of fresh water reserves, waste accumulation, toxic seepage, the loss of rain forest, and a host of other consequences that affect the quality and now the survival of life on earth.

What if we addressed every one of these items in our homes so as to reduce our ecological imprint on the environment—lowering the thermostat in winter and raising it in summer, reducing our use of water, recycling a higher percentage of items, using recycled paper products and certified wood, refusing to put pesticides/herbicides on our lawns or to use toxic cleaning products, mowing with a hand mower, and so on. If many of us acted accordingly, the cumulative effect could be monumental. The point is that we can make a difference with each and every choice we make to walk more lightly upon the earth.

Investing in the future of creation. Our management of our money is also an integral part of our care for the Earth. This commitment includes the willingness to purchase products, appliances, and services that are Earth-friendly. It includes the willingness to refuse to purchase products and services—such as low-mileage cars, lawn service, leaf blowers, and toxic cleaners—that contribute to the degradation and destruction of nature. Investing in the future deals also with our financial contributions. There are many organizations and agencies—local, national, and global—that are working hard to change the hearts of the people and the laws of the land and the practices of corporations—that are worthy of our support. There has been little government support for such non-profit organizations; so they depend upon our generosity to do their vital work. Finally, investing in the future of creation includes our investments in stocks and bonds, in environmental companies, in research programs, and in corporations and businesses that are greening their products and practices. We need to turn the tide in favor of an economy that supports a sustainable lifestyle not just for us personally but also for our society and our world. Our individual commitments are an important part of that movement.

Greening our Workplaces. The same point can be made about our work. Look around at work and begin to notice all the things that negatively affect the environment. In many cases, the effort to reduce the environmental impact will also save the company money. In other cases, the upfront money will get a short term payback. In other matters, the effort may cost money but be well worth it in terms of the health and well being of workers, clients, and neighbors. Some

things may require significant sacrifices on behalf of our overall environment and may require significant adaptive changes on the part of the company. Nevertheless, we are all going to have to do our part to make the human ecosystem safe for future generations. And sometimes we may have to act unilaterally just because we know it is the right thing to do.

So, look around the office or the factory or the sales and services you provide. Take the same care with these matters as you might take with the greening of your home and the greening of your church.

Care for Creation as Spiritual Discipline.

Personal Coping. Everyday we get news items detailing some aspect of the deterioration of the natural world—global warming, extreme weather patterns, droughts, holes in the ozone layer, the destruction of forests, fires out of control, the erosion of arable land, problems of waste, loss of species, problems with clean air and clean water, the population explosion, and on and on. Occasionally we get good news about some new effort being made to address one or more of these issues. But overall it is overwhelming and deeply discouraging. Then we throw up our hands in despair and say “What’s the use” or put our heads in the sand and deny there is any problem we can do anything about.

How are we to cope with these things? How do we find the resources to keep going? There are obviously many ways. Action itself is certainly one way, partly because it makes us feel better but mainly because we *can* make a difference. As we have said, we can take actions in our homes, at our work, and together with others in our communities, such as in our congregation. And we should be embracing these actions wholeheartedly. We should be pursuing changes in our lifestyles and programs of activity that alter our behavior.

Yet, despite all the avenues for action, what we need at the same time is spiritual sustenance and inspiration for the journey. And it is a long, adventuresome journey that humanity is embarking on to address these issues. We need to be prepared to be in this endeavor for the long haul. The degradation of nature is not a problem with a short term solution. If we are to attain a level of human activity that is ecologically sustainable for the future, we need to engage in a process that will transform us and our children in an enduring way. We need to hear words that lift us and challenge us. We need to meditate in ways that give us a solid center of commitment to the whole natural world. We need to become aware of the multiple ways in which our ordinary daily activities have an impact on the intricately woven web of creation. And we need to know the effects that our actions have on all the vulnerable people—both locally and globally—who are most profoundly affected by the degradation of creation. As such, we need to develop our daily attention to the care of the Earth as a spiritual discipline.

It’s a spiritual issue. The point is this: at its most profound level, the ecological crisis is a spiritual crisis. It comes as a result of our alienation from nature, our estrangement from the very ground from which human life, indeed all of life, has emerged. Our civilization has built so many barriers to a relationship with the rest of nature, barriers that separate us from the soil of the land, the myriad animals, the beautiful diversity of plants, the multi-colored and textured rocks, the geological formations that make up our surroundings. We no longer have a sense of belonging, no longer a sense of solidarity with plants and animals—such that we want all forms of life to thrive along with us.

Furthermore, we have reduced nature to things. We are interested in nature primarily in terms of the way we can use it to make our life “better.” And we seem to believe that we can exploit the natural world around us without consequences. We do not see the sacredness of life, the presence of the glory of God in all reality. We have lost the experience of the livingness of all things and the sanctity of all life. We need to recover a sense of reverence for life that will lead us to treat all creatures with love and respect and thereby to walk lightly on the earth. And we have also lost our sense of appropriate human limitations in the presence of the divine. We seem to believe that we and the world are unlimited in potential. We think we have a right to acquire as much wealth as we want or as much wealth as we are able to obtain. We believe our world should know no boundaries. Our economy is based on the hypothesis of unlimited resources and unlimited growth. We take it for granted that we can discard unlimited amounts of trash in a use-and-throwaway society. And we assume that we can put unlimited amounts of pollutants in the air and water. We are guilty as a whole society of unbelievable hubris and arrogance, because we have no sense of limitations. We think that if we are *able* to do something, that notion in itself gives us the *right* to do it. And we do all of this with no real sense of the consequences of our lifestyle on others and on the rest of nature. We need to recover a sense of humility that will put limits on our activity—limits that will respect the rest of life and give space for all to thrive.

And we approach environmental problems much like we approach many other problems. We want a technological fix so that the problems takes care of themselves without really asking anything of us. We do not want to have to change our behavior or our lifestyle—to own less, to drive less, to turn heat down, to purchase certain products, and so on. We just want some magic bullet to target the problem and solve it. True enough, we need all the technological fixes we can find. But we are facing problems that will not be solved by technology alone. We will need to change our lifestyles, our standard of living, our conveniences, our economic relationships, and our attitudes toward and our relationships with nature.

Even when we try to develop a simpler, more limited lifestyle that addresses these issues, we are confronted with the unbelievably fast pace of our modern world—and its corollary, efficiency. We have come to expect that there will be ways to make everything we do more efficient—easier and quicker than ever before. The resulting products and processes of efficiency are among the most devastating to the earth. How can we slow down? How can we stop living at such a break-neck pace? How can we find a center out of which slowly and carefully we can attend to the world around us and the people around us with fresh regard and thoughtfulness? It is not easy.

It is not easy partly because all of the messages we get from our capitalist society telling us that our hunger for meaning and satisfaction will be filled by the *acquisition* of things. If we only could have this car or those clothes, this cell phone or that gadget, this convenience or that luxury, then we would be alright. We need to rethink our values and priorities and begin to live an alternative lifestyle, one that finds meaning and satisfaction from the very source of life itself, a relationship that can restore us to solidarity with nature that will bring us new life.

Creation Spirituality.

A spirituality “rooted” in creation would be a way forward—a relationship with God through the experience of the natural world that would orient us to fresh values, an alternative lifestyle, and a centering of ourselves for kindness and thoughtfulness toward all of life. It is clear that delight is

the right basis for use. We will not exploit that in which we delight. Or to put it another way: we will not save what we do not love.

In the face of all these things, how are we to find the inspiration, the motivation, and the sustenance to embrace care for creation in an enduring way? Will we be motivated by fear? Guilt? Shame? Grief? Rage? What would be an adequate source of energy for this work? How could this work be life-giving and not life-depleting? We will probably be driven by all of these at one time or another. However, in the end, these motivations are not appropriate or productive. With such motivations, we will not make the best choices or be sustained for the long haul. Rather, we are called to be sustained by what the poet Wendell Berry calls the “fund of grace by which alone we live” and what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins depicted as “the dearest freshness deep down things.” Only by seeking to be fed by the reservoir of God’s grace—the same love of God that is in all things and the same delight that God has for all things—only thus will we be able to face the threats before us without being overwhelmed. Only in this way will we have joy and energy for the task.

We are entering an age in which environmental events and concerns will be the dominant issues of the day. As Father Thomas Berry says, developing a sustainable life on earth in the face of ecological challenges is the “great work” of our time. It is a great work that everyone can be part of at some level. It is work that will involve the transformation of people and structures. It is work that will require vision and sacrifice. It is also work to be done with joy and grace. And it is work to be done in our every day life—at home, at work, and in our communities.

Conclusion.

We encourage you to be intentional about your commitment to care for earth. Do a room by room assessment of your home and figure out what choices you can make to walk more lightly on the earth. Look at the practices of lawn and garden care. Evaluate your purchases of goods and food. Get a manual that explains how to green your home. Make a list of commitments you plan to embrace in your home and at work. Post these commitments on the refrigerator or as reminders throughout the home. Get some daily devotional material that reminds you all the time why it is important to do these things. Find a group at your church or in your neighborhood to share your commitment and provide support. Take a course, read a book, consult others who have already begun the journey. Teach others in your family how to participate as earth-keepers. Together join the movement to participate in the great work of our generation—caring for all Earth community.

Reflection Five

Public Witness/Community Involvement

The church exists for the sake of the world. We diminish our understanding of the church and, more importantly, the work of God, if we limit the activity of God to the church. There has been a tendency to bifurcate the work of God into a spiritual/ religious realm separate from the rest of the world by divisions we make into distinct spheres of influence: religion and politics; church and state; Sunday and the rest of the week; the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world; spiritual and material; heaven and earth. All these separations tend to isolate and limit the activity of God to things that explicitly have to do with religion.

God's activity in the world.

However, any study of Christianity will clarify that the focus of God's activity is the whole world. God is larger than church and religion. God is active in every place and every moment. Our image of God is crucial here. If we think God created the world and then separated from it, then we have limited the activity of God. If we think God has only to do with "spiritual" things or things related to the soul, then we have limited God. If we think that God is in heaven and we will encounter God only after death, then we have limited God. If we think God has only to do with religious matters and not matters of business or economics or government, then we have limited God. By contrast, if we imagine that God is in, with, and under all things and all events, then we know God to be immanently and intimately involved in working for good in all things. The work of God's creative activity continues to impinge on the world.

The Work of God in the World. The whole concept of the kingdom of God is based on this idea, namely: What would the world be like if God were the governing force? What love and justice would reign if the God who cares for the poor was the driving force behind human activity? What care would be taken for all of nature—human and non-human, living and non-living—if human beings followed the guidance of the Spirit of the one who created all things in the first place? God is concerned over wars and poverty and famine and oppression and rampant illnesses and disease and earthquakes and holocausts and loss of species and destruction of the fragile earth that has formed over billions of years. A theology of incarnation does not limit God's presence in the world to religious figures and religious movements and religious organizations. Rather, God is present and active in all places and at all times—*not to cause* and control all things but *to influence* the developments of life in the face of human aggression, human greed, and human resistance.

We also reduce the life and activity of God when we limit the work of God to the lives of individuals. To be sure, much of the power of Christianity as a religion has been to affirm that God cares infinitely for each individual. God has numbered the hairs on our head and cares for us as surely as God cares for each single sparrow. The transformation of individuals by conversion, by the encounter with grace, by the forgiveness of sins, by the healing of the body, by the renewal of the mind, by the infusion of love, by the empowerment for goodness and honesty, by the inspiration of the Spirit, by the awakening to hope, by the freedom from addictions, by the blessedness of peace—all these have been the source of human renewal of individuals and those around them who are affected by their transformation. No one can take away from Christianity

this attention to the life of the individual that has instilled people with freedom and a sense of meaning and purpose in life that promotes goodness rather than destructiveness.

At the same time, we do God and Christianity a disservice when we limit the activity of God to individuals. We have learned that institutions and structures too can be evil and destructive: governments can oppress, corporations can exploit, economic systems can generate a great division between the rich and the poor, narrow national loyalties can lead to wars and ethnic cleansing, religious bodies can engage in wars and purges and domination of people both inside and outside of their group, and conventional wisdom can discriminate and abuse women, people of different races, people of different sexual orientation, and people of different religions. Can we imagine for a moment that God is not concerned to transform such structures so as to rid exploitation and oppression and poverty and war? God is working to bend these structures toward justice and mercy. God is concerned for the larger issues of life. And God has called the church into existence to join in this work for the sake of this world.

Furthermore, we do God a disservice when we think that God is concerned only to save people for a life after death, as if this world were only a temporary place of pilgrimage preparing us for the real world in heaven. Such views have led people to ignore the problems we face in the world and to believe that God will save them out of the world, either when they die or when Jesus comes to rescue believers by some kind of rapture. However, there is nothing in the biblical materials that would lead us to think that God's commitment to offer humans eternal life keeps us from a concern for this world. Quite the contrary. It is precisely the promise of the gift of life and of eternal life that liberates us to give ourselves in the present to the care and redemption of all that God has created. It is the assurance of our ultimate fate that frees us to make sacrifices and to expend ourselves on behalf of others and on behalf of the Earth.

Doing God's work in the world. As a church, what we do is for the world. We seek to understand how God is working in the world and join that activity with our own actions. Our life together can be an alternative way of being in the world. And our lives can serve as leaven in the world to bring peace and justice, compassion and healing. When we convert others to our congregations, we bring them in to send them out again. Together, we can address many issues as individuals. But we are called also to address problems as institutions—to advocate for just laws and fair business practices and the preservation of wetlands and the cleanup of brownfields. These approaches represent the public ministry of the church—the church's commitment to act in the public realm to educate and advocate and act for a better world for all.

Some of these actions may include community organizing to protest some environmental condition—a plant that pollutes the air, a green area being lost to urban sprawl, the strip-logging of a local forest, the urging of an incinerator upon a neighborhood. Or the congregation may advocate for those most affected by these environmental degradations. Or the congregation may assist in urging some legislation be passed or defeated by sharing information about the issue and providing opportunities for members to express their opinion to the relevant legislators. Unless we oppose environmental degradation and urge environmental restoration at the corporate, legal, and structural levels our efforts to join the work of God in the world will be limited and counterproductive—because inaction will only support the status quo. As congregations, we need to find ways to address these issues that are in consonance with our church polity and in ways that respect many different views in the congregation.

Ecological Justice

In an article entitled “Whose Earth is it Anyway?” the prominent black theologian James Cone writes that “The fight for justice must be integrated with the fight for life in all its forms.” He notes the popular views that “Blacks don’t care about the environment” and that “White people care more about the endangered whale and the spotted owl than the survival of young blacks in our nation’s cities.” He adds, “What both groups fail to realize is how much they need each other in the struggle for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.”

This very dynamic is why the environmental movement often refers to itself as an “ecological justice” (eco-justice) movement—so that it becomes clear that environmental issues are inextricably tied up with issues of human justice. The reverse is also true. Issues of human justice invariably have a connection with our human degradation of the Earth. For example, in our economic system we treat both people and natural resources as commodities to be exploited for economic gain.

The Bible knows well this connection between human justice and the state of the land. When there was economic exploitation of the rich by the poor, Isaiah wrote, “The earth dries up and withers. The world languishes and withers. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants, for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the land” (Is 24:4-7; see also Joel 2:2-20).

Environmental Racism. A recent article in a local newspaper in Wisconsin ran the headline, “State’s blacks more likely to live in polluted areas.” The article explains that 47 percent of Wisconsin’s black population (compared to 13 percent of white population) lives in the 10 percent of neighborhoods where industrial air pollution poses the most risk to human health. Back in the early 1990s, a report for the United Church of Christ Racial Commission first exposed this type of pattern. In that report, the Reverend Ben Chavis first identified environmental discrimination as *environmental racism*. This report led to the 1991 National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit as an effort to bring national attention to these atrocities.

All this comes as no surprise to black people. Over the last decade, many reports have shown how toxic waste disposal sites, polluting power plants, industrial parks, and waste incinerators have systematically been placed in neighborhoods of poor people and, in particular, poor people of color. The article cited above says that “nationally, blacks are 79 percent more likely than any other ethnic group to live in polluted areas.” The pretext for this placement claims that factories and waste incinerators should go in the most depressed areas because they bring needed jobs. However, the jobs of construction or maintenance seldom end up with the local people, and in any case the negative health consequences (and costs) for the residents of these crowded neighborhoods far outweigh any economic benefits.

The NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) movement has exacerbated this problem. When toxic waste is being distributed and disposed, many middle-class groups, most often white groups, are well-organized in their efforts to keep toxic waste out of the suburbs and wealthy areas. This means that the waste ends up in poor urban or rural areas—communities that often lack grass roots environmental organizations and political clout. The result is that the decisions about where to dump toxic waste are made not on the basis of scientific evidence or fairness but on political grounds by those who have power. The social statement on “Caring for Creation” of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America recognizes these inequities when it states that “The

degradation of the environment occurs where people have little or no voice in decisions—because of racial, gender, or economic discrimination.”

Global eco-justice. Air, land, and water pollution in local contexts is but the tip of the iceberg in the relationship between environmental degradation and human injustice. When we look worldwide, we find the same dynamic of environmental injustice taking place in every country in the world in relation to every ecological problem—global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, deforestation, loss of arable land to desert, over-population, and the proliferation of waste. Most of these global problems are due to the exploitation of people and nature that enables people in first world countries to maintain their high standard of living. It will serve us well in the United States to understand the dynamics of these problems and to diminish the ways we contribute to these injustices.

Making eco-justice decisions/ taking action. Congregations in every context, particularly those working in impoverished communities, along with ecumenical organizations and local ecological groups, can be challenged to identify these dynamics and to address them. Those dealing with the ethical dimensions of environmental decisions often name four norms for decisions that address eco-justice issues: *sustainability* (provide for long-range needs of humans and long-range preservation of nature); *sufficiency* (grant all forms of life the right to share in the goods of creation); *participation* (involve all people and represent all life forms in decisions that affect their well-being); and *solidarity* (recognize the kinship of all life forms and assist those who suffer most from environmental degradation).

All this emerges for us as Christians out of our faith commitment. However, neither the efforts to pursue human justice nor the commitment to care for creation are issues to be relegated only to a “social ministry committee” or a “green team.” They are not add-ons to some more fundamental Christian discipleship. Rather, both human justice and the care for creation are integral to the foundational human/Christian vocation to which God has called us in scripture—to listen to the “cry of the earth” even as we listen to the “cry of the poor.” We are called to love God, love our neighbors, and care for creation. Our faith leads us to see the face of Christ in every person and to see the glory of God in all creation. Earth community as a whole is to be treated with respect and reverence. And restoring earth community—inclusive of all and everything—is the mission of every congregation.

Making a Difference in the Public Realm

Here are some things a congregation, as caring communities, can do to be active in public ministry and political advocacy on behalf of the environment.

- Learn about issues of ecological justice in the local, state, regional, national, and global levels.
- Learn about legal and policy issues on behalf of the environment in the local, state, national, and global arenas. Offer opportunities to express members’ points of view to legislators by letter, petition, delegation, and letters to the editor.
- Find out about local issues of pollution, degradation of natural habitats, land use—and get involved. Join the advocacy for people most affected by these environmental issues.
- Become acquainted with other religious and secular environmental groups in your area. Seek partnerships and encourage members to participate in and support these groups.
- Join the movements in your city to become sustainable or green.

- Engage in hands-on services: restore a habitat, insulate lower-income homes, clean-up the neighborhood streets, plant trees, and so on.
- Work with other churches and faith communities to hold common forums on local issues and workshops for cooperative efforts to green churches.
- As church groups or religious schools, join local efforts to adopt a program of “Community Supported Agriculture.”
- Encourage public recognition for outstanding contributions.

Conclusion

All this emerges for us as Christians out of our faith commitment. However, neither the efforts to pursue human justice nor the commitment to care for creation are issues to be relegated only to a “social ministry committee” or a “green team.” They are not add-ons to some more fundamental Christian discipleship. Rather, both human justice and the care for creation are integral to the foundational human/Christian vocation to which God has called us in scripture—to listen to the “cry of the earth” even as we listen to the “cry of the poor.” We are called to love God, love our neighbors, and care for creation. Our faith leads us to see the face of Christ in every person and to see the glory of God in all creation. Earth community as a whole is to be treated with respect and reverence. And restoring earth community—inclusive of all and everything—is the mission of every congregation.

In fact, “the pursuit of ecological justice” may be the most adequate way to express the mission of a congregation. Such a goal encompasses both the quest for human justice and the commitment to care for Earth. It emphasizes the sense of justice and care for creation both within the congregation and in the congregation’s mission in the world. It affirms the importance of taking the well-being of people and nature into consideration in all decisions, practices, and actions. It encourages every governing group, each committee, all those responsible for the building and grounds, and all planners of events to take into account the ethical/eco-justice implications of the life of the congregation. In this way, we can fulfill the dictum that “the church exists for the sake of the world.”

David Rhoads
Director, Green Congregation Program
drhoads@lstc.edu