

Every Creature Singing

Embracing the Good News for Planet Earth

Participant Guide

A curriculum produced by Mennonite Creation Care Network
and written by Jennifer Halteman Schrock



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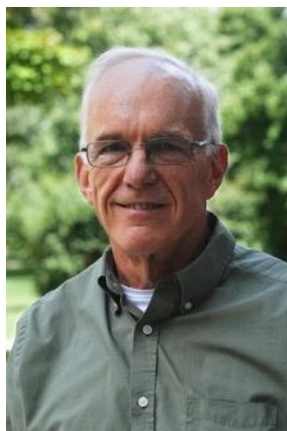
I am also grateful for:

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- [Everence](#), MCCN's other primary financial supporter.
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- Dan Schrock, my long-suffering husband, who bore with me through a rugged writing process. – *Jennifer Halteman Schrock*

About the Curriculum Writing Team



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Curriculum Background

What is Mennonite Creation Care Network?

[Mennonite Creation Care Network \(MCCN\)](http://www.mennocreationcare.org/) is a bi-national Christian organization affiliated with the Mennonite Church USA and the Mennonite Church Canada. MCCN encourages the Church to:

- Claim its biblical and theological foundation regarding the care of God’s Creation.
- Discover the ties that link all created beings to each other and to God.
- Confess the harm we have caused the natural world and our neighbors.
- Act faithfully to restore the earth.

Learn more and join the network at <http://www.mennocreationcare.org/>

Learn more about [Mennonites](#).

[Read the complete resolution.](#)

Common Creation Care Terms

What is creation care?

Many Christian organizations refer to their concern for the natural world as “creation care.” While the use of this term does not imply a particular stance on how and when God created the world, it does affirm the existence of a Creator and a relationship between the Creator and creation. The fact that we see our planet as an expression of God’s love fuels our desire to treat it with respect. Secondly, the term, “environment” is often understood to exclude human beings and refer only to wild landscapes—air, soil, water and plant and animal life. Humans are understood to be part of creation. Finally, the word, *care* implies an emotional connection, not just a particular set of actions. We care *for* the world because we care *about* it.

What is eco-justice?

Christian environmental organizations also frequently use the term, *ecological justice* in their names and literature. An ecological justice perspective is alert to the fact that the poor and disadvantaged are most likely to bear the brunt of environmental problems. Damage to the earth usually also harms the poorest and most vulnerable humans. Caring for the earth and for human beings are seen as complementary concerns, not competing ones.

What is sustainability?

This term is widely used by groups sacred and secular, from multinational corporations to those pursuing the most radical of lifestyles. *Sustainability* can mean a wide range of things depending on who is speaking about it. However, the technical meaning of this word describes the ability of biological systems to provide for present needs without diminishing possibilities for the future. This has ecological, economic and social dimensions.¹

What is watershed discipleship?

Biblical scholar Ched Myers coined the term, *watershed discipleship*, in 2013 to address a concern he saw with the abstract way many people spoke and thought about environmental issues. Watershed discipleship is a word for creation care that is concrete and locally focused on places we know and love. The term has three levels of meaning:

- Watershed discipleship calls people to focus on their own watersheds²; on each of the millions of unique and particular places that make up our planet.
- We are at a watershed moment in history, when environmental justice and sustainability are an integral part of following Jesus Christ.
- We need to become disciples *of* our watersheds, learning what they have to teach about beauty, resiliency and interconnectedness.³

Watershed discipleship is an apt description of the approach we are taking in this curriculum.

Why this curriculum?

Every Creature Singing grew out of a resolution that Mennonite Creation Care Network presented to the delegates at the 2013 Mennonite Church USA Convention in Phoenix, Arizona. The resolution called members of Mennonite churches ***“to commit to growing in their dedication to care for God’s creation as an essential part of the good news of Jesus Christ.”*** It also proposed a series of twelve questions for study and discernment. This curriculum follows the questions in the resolution and is intended to help congregations act on the resolution. [Read the complete resolution.](#)

¹ [What is Sustainability?](#) This site has a helpful diagram showing the three spheres of sustainability and how they overlap.

² A watershed is all the land drained by a particular creek or river. We all live in a watershed, whether we know the name of it or not.

³ [What is Watershed Discipleship?](#)

Why This Title?

The *Every Creature Singing* curriculum takes its name from a vision recorded in Revelation 5:13 - 14. In these verses, the Apostle John describes an alternate reality where all of creation joins in a joyous choir of praise centered on the crucified and risen Christ. This vision is a much-needed antidote to what Eugene Peterson calls the “self as the sovereign text for living...a very individualized personal Trinity of My Holy Wants, My Holy Needs and My Holy Feelings.”⁴ We are not the center of the universe; just members of the choir. The vision of every creature singing is explored further in session 12.

Then I heard every creature

in heaven and on earth and under the earth

and in the sea,

and all that is in them,

singing,

“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

Revelation 5:13-14

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2006, 31 - 33.

Curriculum Structure and Method

This curriculum has three components:

- **Knowing Your Faith:** a biblical emphasis, using a method of interpretation that we are calling an *ecological lens*
- **Knowing Your Place:** a focus on your local community
- **Practices:** Faith-based and household habits that can help us live as if creation mattered.

It is important to understand that this curriculum is not strongly prescriptive. We don't have a list of right answers as to what God is calling your congregation to do and be. We are leaving a lot up to you and the Holy Spirit. Each session is more like a playpen than a set of state educational standards. You are welcome to throw half the toys out of the playpen and chew on just the questions or actions that seem most important in your context. Any one of the three components could be the main focus for a given group.

Knowing Your Faith

Using an Ecological Lens

In this study, we will apply an ecological lens to the biblical texts we read. This is a particular set of questions that, like a jeweler's tools, will enable us to see things we might not otherwise notice. People who study the Bible in depth have a well-provisioned toolkit of lenses, from textual lenses that pursue the most accurate translations to feminist lenses that look for the good news for women. It is always exciting to try on a new lens, as the text may speak in fresh and surprising ways. The more lenses you have, the more skilled you can become as an interpreter, and the less likely you will be to distort the text by reading with just one lens in front of your eyes.

Over the past 20 years, scholars have been developing an ecological lens (or hermeneutic) for hearing what the Bible might be saying about the earth. *The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary* by Habel, Rhodes and Santmire offers a helpful approach. Below is MCCN's adaptation of the questions they suggest on pages 54-65 of their book. We will apply some of these questions to our texts each week. They are lettered instead of numbered to distinguish them from the discussion questions particular to each session. These questions are also available for classroom use in bookmark or handout formats.

Ecological Lens Questions

- A. **Noticing nonhuman elements:** Begin by naming the species or ecosystems in the text. Over the centuries, we have had tended to view nature as a backdrop to human drama rather than something God loves in its own right. Are we overemphasizing the importance of humans in this text at the expense of the rest of creation? When we look for nonhuman entities in scripture, we must remember that sometimes their presence is implied rather than mentioned.
- B. **Where are we?** How does our location in time and space affect our hearing of the text? What might the original writer have seen through a window, and how does that differ from our view? How might the text speak in light of current environmental issues?
- C. **Including creation in our sense of community:** How are humans, land and other living things interconnected? How is creation involved in God's redemptive work? If the non-human beings in this text could speak, what might they say to us? Can we empathize with a river or a bird?
- D. **How is God at work through creation?** God has created the earth with the power to generate life, provide for its inhabitants and heal itself. How is creation involved in God's redemptive work? Have we over-emphasized God's redemption in human history at the expense of recognizing God's sustaining presence in nature?
- E. **Connecting with Christ:** How is Christ involved in creation? In restoring creation?
- F. **Human justice and ecological justice:** Does this passage show a connection between human injustice and damage to the Earth? Does it offer guidance in caring for the most vulnerable people?

Knowing Your Place

Place Questions

Each week, you'll encounter questions that push you to get to know your local ecosystems and the human community that relies on them. Do you know where your water comes from and where it goes when it leaves your house? Do you know what environmental problems bedevil your part of town? The Leader's Guide contains many suggestions for resources that can help you gain a clearer picture of your setting. Pages 11 to 14 below provide an overview of the place questions covered in this curriculum.

Practices

Spiritual Practices: Over the past two thousand years, Christians have developed a large grab bag of practices appropriate to different contexts. In the Spiritual Practices section of each session, we'll seek forms of prayer, Bible study and service that are particularly suited to an era of ecological grief. We may need to reshape our spiritual lives in order to be able to hear the cries of the Earth and to see God's love for other species.

Household Practices: The words, *ecology* and *economics* both come from the Greek root, *oikos*, which means *house*. Hence, household practices include practical, hands-on tasks of all sorts. Here, we mean "household" in the broadest sense, as in planetary housekeeping.

Knowing Your Place Questions: Overview

Session 1

1. What towns, rural areas and bodies of water are within a five-mile radius of your church building? A 25-mile radius? Name them.
2. What urban areas do you draw upon for goods and services? What rural areas provide for urban areas?
3. What parts of this area do you frequently visit? Which parts do you ignore or know little about?
4. What aspects of your community are you curious about?

Session 2

1. What watersheds are part of your region? Are there other natural dividers such as mountains or changes in vegetation?
2. What roadways and bike paths connect or sever communities in your area? Whom do they serve best? How do they affect wildlife or natural areas?
3. How well does your community serve bikers and walkers? How might you make better use of the pedestrian options that are there?

Session 3

1. What biome⁵ is your community in? Where else in the world is this biome found?
2. To what extent are the plants and animals characteristic of this biome present and healthy in your community? Where would you look for them?

⁵ Biomes are large geographical areas of distinctive plant and animal groups, such as grasslands, deciduous forests, deserts, etc.

3. What natural areas are present within your area of focus? What do you know about them? What do you wish you knew? Which of these do you use?
4. What plant and animal species inhabit your church property? Learn their names and a little bit about them.

Session 4

1. Where, within your map areas do participants exercise “dominion” over the land or other natural resources?
2. What entities (i.e. landowners, county commissioners, developers, city planners, etc.) within your map area exercise the most decision-making power over the landscape? What do they do?

Session 5

1. What forms of environmental damage are you aware of in your map area?
2. What do you know about income distribution within your region? What social classes live where?
3. Is racial segregation a part of your map area? Where do minorities live? Can you see any relationships between low income or minority communities and potential environmental hazards such as landfills and factories?

Session 6

1. What are the primary sources of CO₂ within your map area?
2. What energy sources generate the electricity in your home and church building? If fossil fuels are used, where do they come from?
3. How is climate change expected to affect your region?
4. Are people within your map area planning for climate change? Are there business or government leaders who are concerned about this?

Session 7

1. What ethnic or social groups different from yours living within your region? Are there congregations of different nationalities, races or religions? How do you think these other congregations would answer the questions in this study?
2. What kinds of goods are shipped to your region from international locations? Choose one or more common products and research where they come from.

Session 8

1. What organizations within your area are responsible for overseeing the environmental health of the area? What do they do?
2. How can one contribute to these groups?

Session 9

1. Choose a retail business or industry that is located within your map area. Find out what challenges they face in balancing costs and impacts on the environment.
2. Where do the raw materials that your local industries use come from? How are they transported to your region? Could the raw materials be produced locally?
3. How much of your spending supports local businesses? What changes could you make to ensure that the money you spend on goods and services provides income to your neighbors? Is this important to you?

Session 10

1. Where does your drinking water come from? Where does your wastewater go and how is it treated?
2. Where does food come from in your community? What foods are grown within your region? Do they feed the local population or go elsewhere?
3. How can you support the farmers in your region who are doing the best job of caring for their land and animals? Where can you buy their food?

Session 11

1. What native peoples originally inhabited your region? What waves of immigrants followed and when did they arrive? How did they relate to the land? Are remnants of these groups still present?
2. What natural resources or community resources do members within your congregation share? How can the relationships you already have with each other be an asset in caring for these natural resources?

Session 12

1. What soil types are common in your community? What kinds of plants grow best in these soil types? What “root” issues do you notice within your area of study?
2. What does it mean to be rooted in this community? What bonds people to this particular locale? How has this place shaped your relationship with God?
3. What places within your area of study need a sustained commitment?