



Every Creature --- Singing

Embracing
the Good News
for Planet Earth

STUDY GUIDE

Produced by Mennonite Creation Care Network,
Written by **Jennifer Halteman Schrock**,
Canadian Edition by **Deborah Froese**.



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Much of this curriculum was birthed at Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College, a 1,189-acre nature centre in north central Indiana. Merry Lea employs the three mentioned above. The perspectives reflected in this curriculum have grown from the interplay between the landscapes at Merry Lea and our staff of environmental educators. Without the wetlands, woodlands and prairies outside our windows—and the vision of our founding donors, Lee and Mary Jane Rieth, who thought to preserve them—this curriculum would not exist.

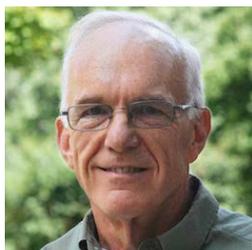
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About the Curriculum Team



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Luke Gascho, Ed.D., is the executive director of Merry Lea. He also provides leadership for MCCN's Creation Care Council. Luke wrote the resolution that generated this curriculum and helped shepherd it from rough draft to a delegate vote at MCUSA's 2013 convention. Luke is the author of *Creation Care: Keepers of the Earth, Living Stewardship Series*, 2008. In addition to administrative tasks, he teaches a course on creation care at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Ind., and a graduate course on leadership. At home, Luke finds joy in tending his orchard.



Janie Beck Kreider, M.Div., is the associate coordinator of public programs at Merry Lea. Janie manages the MCCN website and worked through the many revisions necessary to present the curriculum electronically. Otherwise, she spends her time organizing retreats, hikes, and other events; and writing. Janie is a graduate of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical

Seminary where she wrote her master's thesis on feminist biblical scholars in the Mennonite church. She is passionate about empowering marginalized voices in the church, promoting sustainable care of the earth, cooking delicious food, singing folk music and traveling with her husband Luke.



Joanne Moyer, PhD, is an assistant professor of Environmental Studies and Geography at The King's University in Edmonton, Alberta. Her recent research explores faith-based organizations engaged in environmental work in Kenya and Canada. Joanne has worked as an environmental consultant for various research and writing projects, including the Mennonite Central Committee's 7 Days website, which was later published as *Earth Trek: Celebrating and Sustaining God's Creation*. She also volunteered with Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba Peace Advisory Committee and Mennonite Church Canada's Climate Change Working Group.



Deborah Froese adapted the curriculum for a Canadian audience. When she's not editing, she shares stories about the work of the wider church through her role as Director, News Services for Mennonite Church Canada. In her spare time, Deb serves on the editorial committee for the newsletter of her home congregation and writes fiction. She also enjoys music, photography, and other forms of art



Matt Veith designed and programmed the digital and print editions of this Canadian adaption of the curriculum. Outside of his professional work as a multimedia artist at Mennonite Church Canada, Matt works as a freelance graphic designer and photographer in the Winnipeg area. An avid cyclist, he spends a lot of time tinkering on projects and working as an amateur bike mechanic.



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!”

REVELATION 5:13-14

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To access a printable version of the *Every Creature Singing Study Guide* as well as the accompanying *Leader's Guide* and other related resources, visit: commonword.ca/go/613

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Curriculum Background

What is Mennonite Creation Care Network?

Mennonite Creation Care Network (MCCN) is a bi-national Christian organization affiliated with Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA. 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 neighbours.
- Act faithfully to restore the earth.

As of April 2015, MCCN included over 750 individual members and 73 congregations who have joined the 100 Shades of Green congregational initiative. The network maintains a [website](#) and regular email communication with members.

Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College, Wolf Lake, Indiana, and Everence, Goshen, Indiana, are the primary supporters that enable MCCN to exist.

- [Learn more about Mennonites](#)
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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. As partners of MCCN, Mennonite Church Canada requested permission to adapt the curriculum for a Canadian context.

[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*. Initially, those who coined the term may have wanted to distance themselves from secular environmental organizations, but there are several reasons why this phrase remains a fitting one for us to use. 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. 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. This understanding argues against the idea that caring for the earth and looking out for human beings are contradictory concerns.

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

1 <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/sustainvu/who-we-are/what-is-sustainability/>

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 describes 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 watersheds;² on each of the millions of unique and particular places that make up our planet. Vague, abstract anxieties accomplish little.
- We are at a watershed moment in history, when environmental justice and sustainability **must be** integral to everything we do as disciples if we intend to be faithful followers of 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.

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 <http://watersheddiscipleship.org/>

Curriculum Structure and Method

This curriculum has four components:

1. A biblical emphasis, using a method of interpretation that we call an *ecological lens*.
2. A *local ecosystem focus for each session*, with questions designed to help you become more familiar with your local community environment
3. *Suggested spiritual practices*
4. *Suggested household practices*

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 provincial 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.

Through 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 particularly helpful approach. In [Unit 2, Session 6](#) of this curriculum, you'll find an adaptation of the questions the authors 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. Also note that these questions are available for classroom use in bookmark or handout formats.

In the first session, you are invited to review [Through an Ecological Lens](#) in its entirety. Each subsequent session will highlight particular questions to help sharpen your focus on the subject matter.

Local Ecosystem Focus

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 goes when it leaves your house? Do you know what environmental problems bedevil your part of town? Each week you'll work with maps and resources suggested in this curriculum to gain a clearer picture of your setting. A session by session overview of Local Ecosystem Focus questions is located [here](#).

Suggested Spiritual Practices

Each session will suggest some spiritual practices related to creation and its care. Over the past two thousand years, Christians have developed a large grab bag of practices appropriate to different contexts. In this 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. An overview of suggested spiritual practices is located [here](#).

Suggested 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. An overview of all of the household practices suggested in this curriculum is located near the end of [Unit 1, Session 1](#).

About Other Resources

Every Creature Singing is a rich curriculum in and of itself, but it also points to numerous external resources. Some of these and other creation care resources are available at www.commonword.ca/go/476, the bookstore and resource centre of Mennonite Church Canada and Canadian Mennonite University. Links are provided for resources that are available from CommonWord at the time of this printing.

This Canadian Edition of *Every Creature Singing* is designed primarily for electronic use and is hyperlinked to a rich array of web resources. While we encourage you to minimize the use of natural resources to study this curriculum, we recognize that for some, it will be more helpful to engage with the material in [print format](#). A condensed text-only print version is also available for download. For those who prefer to print the curriculum, a summary of the hyperlinks used in *Every Creature Singing* are available through an alphabetical list at (CommonWord link) for easy reference.

Although we have done our best to ensure all hyperlinks are up-to-date before publication, any changes to them or the resources they connect with are beyond our control.





Session 1:

Don't Be Afraid

Scripture: Matthew 1

Through an Ecological Lens:

Begin by reviewing the questions to sharpen your ability to view creation through an ecological lens, and refer to them as you read through Session 1.

God has been and will be with us.

While I was writing this curriculum, I was part of a group of people who were praying their way through the Gospel of Matthew together. Each of us had committed to spending at least an hour a week in this practice. I got myself a notebook and resolved to pray by writing out or drawing each text.

Eagerly, I opened the Gospel of Matthew only to come face to face with a long list of Hebrew men. I had forgotten that my first prayer was going to be a genealogy! I traced my finger across the page of ancient names. All were long dead. A few were saints, some were real stinkers, and others had left behind nothing but their names.

I chose to draw this text as a mausoleum with shelves of burial urns. I drew urns of all shapes and sizes, placing a name on each one. By the third set of 14 names, I was running out of shapes and beginning to feel like the urns would go on forever.

Then, abruptly, I came upon a living, breathing man, asleep under all those shelves. He was a young carpenter beset by a vexing personal problem: his fiancé was pregnant with a child he knew wasn't his. The man was dreaming, and in his dream, an angel came to him with a message:

Do not be afraid, it said.

Never mind the break in your esteemed bloodline. This child is of the Holy Spirit.

God is with you.

The text trembled and cracked open. I gaped open-mouthed. Never before had I heard this familiar Christmas story in quite this way. Never before had I seen the Christ child emerging with such drama from the failures of the past, his birth itself a resurrection.

Matthew 1 is a bit of a curve ball. I bet you didn't think we'd start *here*. This may be the only creation care curriculum in existence that begins with a genealogy and a Christmas story. Nevertheless, I tell this unlikely story at the outset of a study on creation care because it embodies an important set of assumptions underlying this curriculum.

The long view is important.

A genealogy is a reminder that we are links in the long chain of human history, with generations before us and generations to come. Each generation passes on the care of the places they belong to and a handful of ideas about what is worth knowing. "Remember the seventh generation," is a common saying these days in environmental circles. The idea, adopted from the Indigenous culture, is that we should consider the impact of every decision we make on people as many as seven generations into the future. Whether this is practically possible is another matter. I wonder what the people living in my community seven generations ago in a few scattered log cabins without electricity would have done differently if they *had* thought about me. Any guesses what the people of 2189 might need?

All the same, this long perspective can help to focus our task. Let those folks on the cusp of the 23rd century think our fashions are ridiculous, our science is primitive and our big ethical issues are self-evident. If we can leave them clean water, air and soil, we've done our job. If we can teach them faith, hope and love, there is hope for the 14th generation too.

God is with us.

Along with nearly every call to action in the Bible come the words, "Do not be afraid. I am with you." If you believe that environmental problems are important, and perhaps the most pressing issues of the 21st century, why would you choose a Christian worldview to confront them? For one thing, Christianity promises solidarity and outside help. God-with-us is the central affirmation of the Christian faith.

Who doesn't fear for our children, our grandchildren, our nieces and nephews and little neighbors? Left all alone with our bickering political leaders and a ticking clock, the weight of climate change and mountaintop removal, soil erosion and species extinction is a crushing burden of responsibility. Thankfully, saving the world is ultimately God's problem. The good news for Christians is that God is already at work ahead of us, birthing new life out of despair and inviting us to join in. To some people, reliance on God is a cop-out and an excuse to ignore environmental problems. We say the Holy Spirit is our source of energy and hope.

Christ is central to what this endeavor is about.

The Hebrew people also thought in sevens. To them, the number represented completeness and wholeness. Matthew 1 gives us three sets of 14 generations—six sets of seven, if you will.

And then comes the startling seventh generation: God-with-us in the form of a fetus. The presence of God among us sometimes appears small and fragile. Maybe even unwanted. Maybe even illegitimate. Like Joseph, we are gifted with something that needs

welcome and nurture. It would be nice if God would blow in like a storm cloud and fix all of our environmental problems with mighty acts of power. However, it seems that the way forward is the way of the Suffering Servant, who walked among us and endured rejection, failure and death.

Attending to the violence and injustice done to the earth and its human and animal dependents is equally painful today. New Zealand theologian Andrew Shepherd puts it this way: “To walk in the steps of the suffering Savior will surely involve coming face to face with degradation and pollution . . . the polluted stream, the toxic waste dump, the rubbish-filled gully. . . .Inevitably, these places of environmental destruction will often be the places where those less fortunate, those blessed by God, also reside. A characteristic mark therefore of Christian ecological living will be an acceptance of and experiencing of suffering and pain.”⁴

This willingness to enter into suffering also leads to joy. You might, for example, discover that this planet—maybe even your neighbourhood—is more intricate and magical than you ever dreamed.

The Bible speaks to us in our own time and place.

Many creation care materials for churches focus on practical problems: how to insulate the sanctuary, how to organize a river cleanup, and so forth. Why bog down in biblical study and theology? Why read an ancient book if your problem is climate change? In the Mennonite Church, we believe that the Bible has generative power and can speak to our times in unexpected ways. Just as Christ suddenly appears in Matthew 1 from the tombs of the past, Christ can also appear among us as we struggle to understand a 2,000-year-old book. When people gather to hear the Word, transformation can occur. “Is the Bible green?” is not really the right question for us. A far more interesting question is, “What will happen when we here in this corner of the planet, place our sacred

4 Andrew Shepherd, [“Creation And Christology: The Ecological Crisis And Eschatological Ethics.”](#) Stimulus 18.4 (2010) 51-57. Used with permission.

texts and the cries of the Earth side by side and listen to them together?”

As we began this curriculum, church leadership—and other voices as well—reminded us of the diversity of people who might be using it. “Please remember our rural congregations . . . our urban congregations . . . our French-speaking congregations . . . our working class congregations . . . our Indigenous and multi-cultural congregations . . . our farmers . . . our businessmen . . . our scientists . . . our conservatives . . . our liberals. . . .”

I am quite sure that our own attempts to provision this array of stakeholders will fall short of the mark. All the same, I am confident that if a group submits to the spiritual disciplines suggested, the Holy Spirit will speak in language they can hear.

For Discussion

Key Ideas

- 1. Is God with us?** Do you agree with the four bold-print assumptions in this week's essay? Which ones give you trouble, if any? Do you think these statements apply to a study on creation care in your community?
 - 1. The long view is important.**
 - 2. God is with us.**
 - 3. Christ is central to this endeavor.**
 - 4. The Bible speaks to us in our own time and place.**
- 2. What fears do you have** related to current environmental issues? What fears do you have about entering into this study with your congregation?
- 3. Using an ecological lens:** Another reason we chose to begin with Matthew 1 is that it appears to only deal with humans. Can the ecological lens questions [here](#) work even with this unlikely text? Try asking them and see! If you are stumped, ponder how land is part of the story that this genealogy reviews.

Digging Deeper

- 1. What has your experience with Bible study been like?** Has the Bible more often been a place of surprise encounters or a graveyard of unfamiliar names? Are you impatient to discuss current issues or practical actions, or excited to read the Bible with a new lens?
- 2. Breaks and gaps:** What new direction does Jesus' lineage break open in a study that brings the Christian tradition into dialogue with your neighbourhood and landscape?
- 3. Time:** How will you find time to make the questions and practices that this study suggests a priority? What would you gladly (or sadly) give up to do so?

Local Ecosystem Focus

- 1. What towns, rural areas and bodies of water** are within an 8 km radius of your church building? A 40 km radius?
- 2. What urban areas do your members** draw upon for goods and services? What rural areas provide for urban areas?
- 3. Which parts of these areas do you frequently visit?** Which parts do you ignore, or know little about?
- 4.** What aspects of your community are you curious about?

Suggested Spiritual Practices

5. **Adopt a prayer of intent:** It is important to remember why we are doing what we are doing. Use a prayer of intent before trying the spiritual practices you select from this curriculum. The prayer below is the one the leader's guide suggests for classroom use. Plural pronouns are replaced with I, me, and so on. You could use this prayer, or write your own prayer of intent if you prefer.

Jesus Christ, Creator and Redeemer of all things—I long to meet you: in the scriptures, in our communities, in creation. I ask for a heart open to beauty, joy and awe. I ask for courage to witness the world's pain.

6. **Reflect on the Overview of Spiritual Practices** for this Session in the Focus Materials Section at the end of this curriculum. It lists all the practices suggested in this curriculum. Mark those you definitely want to try, or choose one to practice regularly throughout the quarter.

Suggested Household Practices

7. **Discuss Digging Deeper question 3** at home with your household. How will you find time to make the questions and practices that this study suggests a priority?
8. **Reflect on the Overview of Household Practices** for this Session in the Focus Materials Section at the end of this curriculum.

Suggested Resources

[“What is Watershed Discipleship?”](#)

Habel, Norman C., David Rhoads and H. Paul Santmire, eds. [*The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary*](#). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010.

Pages 54-65 of this book inspired the ecological lens questions used in this curriculum.

Horrell, David G., et. al, eds. *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*. New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2010.

The introduction to this book (pp. 1-11) will introduce the academic reader to the texts and ideas commonly discussed in this area of biblical studies.

Shepherd, Andrew. “Christ and Creation: The Ecological Crisis And Eschatological Ethics.” *Stimulus* 18.4 (2010): 5157.

“Christ and Creation,” quoted in the essay above, is available on the MCCN website through the link provided.

Wild, Jeff and Peter Bakken. *Church on Earth: Grounding Your Ministry in a Sense of Place*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.

This book looks at how we are called to care for our specific places. Where has God placed your congregation for wonder and obedience?



Session 2:

Jesus and Creation: In Search of a Whole Gospel

Scriptures: Colossians 1:15-20, John 3:16, Luke 9:58

Through an Ecological Lens:

Try questions A and E from with Colossians 1:15-20.

When we read the Bible, we sometimes
make dangerous divisions.

Most people assume that while the Old Testament may have some nice nature poetry and some creation stories, Jesus and the New Testament focus on humans. Most people also assume that Jesus' work of preaching the reign of God, healing the sick, driving out demons, finding the lost, getting crucified and rising from the dead pertained mainly to humans also. But is that the *whole* Gospel?

“What we are trying to do here is engage people with the whole gospel,” Luke Gascho insisted as our writing team wrestled with this crucial session on Jesus and creation. As he spoke, he drew a circle on scratch paper with a jagged chunk cut out of it. As I looked at his sketch, I thought the circle needed to be much bigger, and the jagged chunk looked sharp and dangerous. I pictured each of us walking around clutching our own jagged chunks of the gospel, sometimes spearing each other.

Some of us wield a Jesus-as-my-personal-savior fragment. This broken piece understands Christian faith as an otherworldly commitment with an end-of-life benefit that enables us to float off to some other existence in a disembodied state when we die. Since God is only interested in souls, what happens *on* earth or *to* the earth is of little consequence. Others are busy with a social-cause-as-gospel fragment. This group sees religion primarily as a tool to tackle peacemaking or climate change or some other issue, discarding all that does not serve their cause. God, Jesus, the Bible and other Christians with different priorities sometimes embarrass them.

“Do any of us really grasp the *whole* gospel?” I wondered as I imagined a circle as wide as the horizon, pulsating with life. One bright side to the environmental crisis is that it forces us to confront the holes in our gospel and to seek an understanding of Jesus Christ adequate to the 21st century and its troubled ecosystems.

Numerous scriptures extend salvation to all of creation, not just humans. From Noah’s ark to the cattle of Nineveh, from John 3:16 and Job to Romans 8, it appears that human beings and the earth are a package deal. In Genesis 6-9, God saves both humans and animals from the flood, and the earth is washed clean in the process. In Jonah 3 and 4, God saves Nineveh partly because of the animals it contains. In John 3:16, the Greek word for world is *kosmos*—God loves the *world*, not just humans. In Job 38-42, Job gets a private audience with God and is reminded that even human suffering does not trump the integrity and beauty of creation. In Romans 8:18-25, all of creation groans, waiting for redemption.

In our search for a complete gospel, we might need to develop a Christology both higher and lower than the one we’ve been using. Here is a starting point: The following two quick portraits depict a Jesus that one might meet at a nature center, or on a garbage dump, or while lying awake at night worrying about the future. May they patch a hole in your own Gospel, or smooth a jagged edge.

Portrait 1: Jesus the Hiker⁵, Luke 9:58

“Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head,” Jesus once warned a follower. When Jesus chose a nomadic lifestyle in order to preach the reign of God, he chose a life lived outdoors, sometimes without shelter. His vocation committed him not only to “the lost sheep of Israel” but also to blisters and dusty feet, to considering lilies and watching sparrows; to stunning lake views and outdoor classrooms.

It is easy to miss Jesus-the-hiker in a world filled with cars and airports, so try imagining these Bible stories in their geographical context:

- **Preaching at Nazareth:** (Luke 4) The 61 km walk from Nazareth to Capernaum following Jesus’ inaugural announcement of his ministry offered ample time to reflect on how that sermon was received. Forest scenery, stunning mountain overlooks and views of the Sea of Galilee may have been a comfort.
- **Jesus cleanses the temple:** (John 2:12-16) The annual Passover hike from Galilee to Jerusalem was over 160 kilometers one way through rolling hills and olive groves. Fortunately, it took place during peak wildflower season.
- **Healing the blind men at Jericho** (Matthew 20:29-21:1): This was the beginning of a rugged 18 km uphill climb to Jerusalem. The path led through steep canyons, some of which are now bird sanctuaries.

These interludes, chosen at random, are just a tiny fraction of the time Jesus spent outdoors. There’s a hike hiding between nearly every story in the Gospels. Jesus’ travels extended at least 240 kilometers north to south and 80 kilometers east to west.

5 Portions of this section of the essay first appeared among the Bible essays for teachers in "God's Good Creation," in the Summer 2013 *Gather 'Round* series.

He appears in a variety of ecosystems: with the wild beasts in the Judean wilderness during the temptation, calling disciples along a lakeshore; plucking grain while walking through farmers' fields, rock-climbing to the site of the Transfiguration and routinely escaping to remote places for prayer and for safety.⁶

With this lifestyle, how could Jesus *not* have had an intimate relationship with the natural world? While Jesus' preaching appears to focus on human concerns rather than creation, he spoke many of those words on trails and hillsides. His parables suggest he was familiar with the plants and farming practices of his day, and he also had a keen eye for good fishing spots.

What would happen if we took time to know this outdoorsy side of Jesus today? How would it reshape our relationship with our own towns and local flora and fauna? "No one can truly know Christ except by following him in life," Hans Denck, an oft-quoted Anabaptist, once said. If we take Denck literally, we might want to walk in our communities more often.

Portrait 2: Christ, the Centre of All Creation. Colossians 1:15-20

Christ is the creator as well as redeemer in Christian theology. One text that emphasizes this role is Colossians 1:15–20, a hymn sung by the early church. If you sit with this hymn to Christ the Creator for any length of time, you will soon feel the weight of "all things" bearing down on you. Those two words occur six times. *All things* were created with, in and through Christ; in him *all things* hold together; through him, God is reconciling *all things*. Here, Jesus the crucified one is the centre and source of the entire cosmos, from snails to whales to galaxies. He is what J. Philip Newell calls, "a presence of love at the heart of creation."⁷

6 For help visualizing Jesus' landscape, see the [Jesus Trail](#) or [Walking with Jesus in the Galilee](#).
7 Phillip J. Newell, [Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation](#) (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008) 96.

Some early Christian writers understood Christ as one of God's two hands forming creation.⁸ "How can this be?" we might wonder. One way some theologians make sense out of texts such as Colossians 1 and Christ's involvement in creation is to understand the creation of the world as an act of God's self-limiting. God makes room for something other than Godself to exist, and doing so requires limiting God's own freedom and power. By giving human beings the capacity to think, reason and choose evil as well as good, God submits to suffering with us and our foolish choices, thus choosing the cross even in the act of creation. Naming Christ as creator need not bog us down in metaphysical speculations of the sort that kept fourth century Christians at each other's throats. Rather, it affirms that the capacity to suffer with us in an intimate way is part of God's nature—past, present and future. It is part of what enabled creation; it was made manifest most fully in Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection and it is ongoing today and into the future.⁹

Another way to make sense of this text is to recognize its concrete, political edge. Walsh and Keesmaat call it subversive poetry, aimed at reshaping the imagination of early Christians. To call *Christ* the image of God and the center of all things in an empire that called Caesar the image of God and saw *itself* as the center of all things was nothing short of treasonous.¹⁰ What gods would we dethrone today if we took the Christ hymn in Colossians seriously? Is it oil that holds our world together? The global economy? If God is in the business of reconciling all things in Christ (1:20), dare we say that the crucified Christ suffers with a mountain shattered by mining?¹¹ And if we do say that, how does it change our assumptions about a practice like mountaintop removal?

Finally, we may simply need to admit that this highest of Christologies defies rational explanation. It is a song to sing during

8 Irenaeus, a second-century theologian, says this in [Against Heresies, 4.20.1](#) and [5.28.4](#).

9 Thomas Finger takes this line of thought in "An Anabaptist Mennonite Theology of Creation," [Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World](#), (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 164-165. Other theologians for whom both the trinity and creation are important include Jurgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf and Norman Wirzba.

10 Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, [Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004) 83-84.

11 See [Christians for the Mountains](#) to learn more. Or see the documentary, *Mountain Mourning*.

worship, not a treatise to dissect. It helps to remember that the Apostle Paul was a mystic. Pauline thought is grounded, not in distance logged with the earthly Jesus, but in a vision Paul had of the risen Christ on the Damascus Road. All of Paul's work building bridges between Jews and Gentiles and coaxing and counselling fledgling congregations grows out of that numinous encounter. Likely, he struggled the rest of his life to put his vision of Christ into words. I read the expansiveness of Colossians 1 in that spirit and take comfort in the fact that there is "deeper magic" than what we can know or master.

Philip Yancey has written a book entitled, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1995). I think we should all write that book—every ten years. Fragmented gospels are dangerous, and the Jesus we need most at this juncture in history is the savior of the whole world, not just human beings.

For Discussion

Key ideas

1. **If you had to state your understanding of the gospel** in seven words, what would you say? Is creation in any way represented in your seven-word gospel?
2. **According to the essay for this session**, good news that does not include the earth is a fragmented gospel. Do you agree or disagree? Support your argument. How is creation part of the holistic good news of Jesus Christ?
3. **Do you feel that you know Jesus, the hiker?** Does the cosmic Christ mean anything to you? Which one of these versions of Jesus is most familiar to you? Least familiar? Are you interested in knowing either of them better?
4. **How would you title the Jesus** that your congregation preaches? How is this Jesus presented?
5. **If your congregation shifted its understanding** of the good news to include good news for creation, how would your worship services and congregational life change? Your mission statement?
6. **In what ways is your congregation an outpost** of good news for the region inside the circle on your map?

Digging Deeper

1. **According to Colossians 1, Christ links all created beings** to each other and to God. How might this understanding shape your relationship with creation?
2. **Ponder these questions from the essay:** What gods would we dethrone today if we took the Christ hymn in Colossians seriously? Is it oil that supposedly holds our world together? The global economy? Western progress?
3. **Christians interpret the crucifixion** to mean that God is with us in human suffering. Do you believe God is also present and grieving when the land or animals suffer?

Local Ecosystem Focus

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?
4. **What adaptations** are needed?

Suggested Spiritual Practices

1. **Walk your community** with an eye to the landscape, its inhabitants and how they interact. Walk in a part of your local ecosystem that is new to you, or walk a distance you commonly drive, such as the distance from your home to church. You might carry Key Idea question 6 along with you. Did this practice enable you to connect with Jesus and his ministry or with your community in a new way?
2. **Bible study:** Choose one of the following texts that were referred to earlier in this session and spend time with it. Apply questions A and E from [Through an Ecological Lens](#).
*Genesis 6-9, Job 38-42, Jonah 3 and 4,
John 3:16, Romans 8:18-25*
3. **Pray, sing or chant** the Christ hymn in Colossians 1:15-20 outdoors this week, pausing on the word, ALL each time you come to it. What aspect of “all” is God inviting you to see right now?

4. **Choose a natural object** you can hold, or an animal it is easy for you to watch. Imagine God’s love extending to this creature.
5. **Find a photograph** related to a current environmental issue that troubles you and hold it while you pray for this troubled corner of the world. Imagine God’s love extending to this place, including the landscape, plants and animals involved.
6. **Meditate on this quote:**
 “[The cross] is a revelation of the Presence at the heart of the universe. It reveals the greatest truth, that we will keep our heart only by giving our heart away, that we will find ourselves only by losing ourselves in love, that we will gain salvation only by spreading our arms wide for one another and for the earth, and that we will be saved together, not in separation.” - J. Philip Newell, *Christ of the Celts*, p. 104

Suggested Household Practices

1. **Plan ways to walk, bike or carpool more often.** This could include examining your schedule, repairing a bicycle, getting reflectors, trying out biking or walking routes, etc. In Canada, roughly 48% of greenhouse gas emissions¹² are related to the oil and gas industry and transportation.
2. **Avoid aggressive driving and idling your car.** Gas guzzling driving habits include rapid stops and starts and driving over 100 km per hour. Avoid braking whenever possible by slowing down gradually at stoplights. For information, see [Fuel Efficient Driving Techniques](#) . For information on why it is both unnecessary and damaging to the air to idle your car, see [Idling-Frequently Asked Questions](#).

Suggested Resources

Bergen, Wes. [You are NOT Going to Heaven \(and why it doesn't matter\)](#). Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013.

“God will take care of heaven,” Bergen writes. “Our task is to take care of the earth.” This saucy book will offend some with its cavalier dismissal of the importance of life after death, but others can benefit from its dogged pursuit of what salvation looks like here and now.

12 According to Government of Canada statistics for **distribution of greenhouse gas emissions by economic sector, Canada, 2013**.

Bredin, Mark. *The Ecology of the New Testament: Creation, Recreation and the Environment*. Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica Publishing, 2010.

We must care for creation because we are called to love what God loves, Bredin says. He asks ecological questions of many familiar parts of the New Testament, such as the Lord's Prayer, the beatitudes and Jesus' temptation. He shows how the New Testament speaks to "the life-threatening, violent imperialism and tribalism lying at the heart of the ecological crisis."

Jones, James. *Jesus and the Earth*. London, England: SPCK, 2003.

In this brief book, Jones works with Jesus' identity as the Son of Man. In Hebrew, this phrase means, *Son of Adam*, or more literally, *Son of the one made out of earth*. Writing as an urban bishop, Jones' interests are practical and pastoral.

Redekop, Calvin, ed. [*Creation & the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World*](#). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

See especially:

- Weaver, "The New Testament and the Environment: Toward a Christology for the Cosmos."
- Finger, "An Anabaptist Mennonite Theology of Creation."

Newell, J. Philip. [*Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation*](#). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008.

Who is Christ for us today? Might the Celtic tradition, which was less influenced by the Roman Empire than other parts of the Church, have insights to share? Christ and creation intersect in this brief and poetic book.



Session 3:

Biblical Views of Nature

Scripture: Psalm 104

Related Texts: Psalm 19, Psalm 50:10-11, Psalm 65, Revelation 5:13-14, Job 38-41, Leviticus 25:1-28

Through an Ecological Lens:
Try A and D with Psalm 104.

A heritage of ecological ethics.

Creation care materials often begin by reflecting on the unique role of human beings as caretakers of the planet. This is like handing high school seniors medical degrees. Shouldn't they first know something about the human body and its systems? Likewise, we cannot understand our unique niche on this planet until we have a sense of the whole we are a part of.

Let's consider what our faith teaches about **nature** and then rush out and take a few environmental science classes.

Suppose Mary and Joseph had had a homeschool curriculum. What might it have looked like? While it would be naïve to assume that the son of a carpenter never thought of trees in terms of board feet, this is not the only perspective he would have learned. In fact, Jesus inherited a profound ecological ethic through his Jewish ancestry.¹³

13 Vernon Visick, "Creation's Care and Keeping in the Life of Jesus," in Calvin B. DeWitt, ed. *The Environment and the Christian: What Can We Learn from the New Testament?*

Here are a few key points:

1. Live as if the Earth belongs to God.
2. Value all parts of nature.
3. Listen for creation's voice.
4. Discern what nature has to teach us about God.
5. Embrace creation as community and covenant partners.

Let's look at each of these in turn.

1. The Earth belongs to God.

Psalm 24:1 is perhaps the most familiar assertion of God's relationship with the earth:

“The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it;
the world and those who live in it.”

But there are many similar statements. In Psalm 50, where God pleads for offerings of gratitude rather than burnt animals, the claim is more specific:

For every wild animal of the forest is mine,
The cattle on a thousand hills.
I know all the birds of the air,
And all that moves in the field is mine.
(vs. 10-11)

However, it is Psalm 104—with its roaring lions and frolicking sea monsters—that provides the most vivid picture of what God's ownership of the earth looks like. Here, creation has its own relationship to God that is independent of humans. God is no absentee landlord, but rather a homemaker, engaged moment-by-moment, breath-by-breath in the affairs of creation.

God discerns what habitat is right for each creature and offers food and abundant water for all. “Novel to this biblical psalm is the claim that creation is sustained not by God’s covenantal commitment but by God’s unabashed joy,” William Brown remarks in his book, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*.¹⁴

The idea that the earth is ultimately God’s is not just the stuff of poetry and song, however; it is a pragmatic and political assertion also expressed in biblical books of law and history. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, land is a gift that is God’s to give and that binds the receiver to the giver. “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants,” Leviticus 25:23 cautions. This is in a passage legislating Sabbath years and the year of Jubilee. The laws granted the land proper rest, and ancestral property that had been sold was supposed to revert to its original owners every 50th year. Even kings were not free to use the land however they wished, as I Kings 21 illustrates. In this story of a covetous ruler and his neighbor who refused to sell ancestral lands, the Hebrew King Ahab can only sulk. It is his Phoenician wife who executes the lies and murder necessary to gain the desired garden: acts that the Prophet Elijah roundly condemns. If God is still present and engaged with creation, then there are limits on how human beings may live on the land.

2. Value all parts of nature.

If God created nature, pronounced it good and remains in constant relationship with the earth, then all of nature has value, even if humans don’t find it useful. The rock badgers, lions and wild donkeys mentioned in Psalm 104 did not have economic value to ancient people. Dangerous animals like sea monsters didn’t either, but in God’s eyes in verse 26, they are playful pets. When a commercial timber species does appear in verse 16, it is as a habitat for birds. Certainly the Psalmist knew that empires fought their way to the cedars of Lebanon and then carted them off by the thousands

14 William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science and the Ecology of Wonder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 141-143.

for building projects. Forests were strategic military sites, like oil fields are today.¹⁵ Here, however, their role within their ecosystem takes center stage.

3. Listen for creation's voice.

In her book, *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*¹⁶, Elizabeth Tova Bailey writes about the year she spent watching a snail. One day while bedridden with a debilitating illness, Bailey received the gift of a potted violet with a woodland snail tucked under one leaf. The snail-like pace of her own life allowed her the time to observe this tiny invertebrate and even value it as a companion.

She was intrigued by the care her snail took in tending its eggs and its selection of different spots to lay them, depending on the moisture level of the terrarium. Bailey mourned when the snail disappeared and rejoiced when she found it again. She became so attuned to her snail that she could even hear the tiny sounds it made when it was eating. It sounded like “someone very small munching celery,” she said.

The voice Bailey reports hearing is a tame little voice compared to the bold rumbles and roars, the dancing and clapping that biblical texts attribute to nature as it both praises and laments. The praise of non-human creatures occurs 50 times in 25 contexts, mostly in the Psalms and Isaiah.¹⁷ Some of them, such as the vast choir of singing creatures that John hears in Revelation 5, describe an end-time redemption and new creation. Others are descriptions of the world as we know it. In Psalm 65:13, meadows clothe themselves in flocks and valleys dress up in grain, shouting and singing for joy. In Psalm 98:7-8, seas roar and floods clap their hands. In Job 38, stars sing for joy and Psalm 148 exhorts everything from sea monsters to snow to praise God. Meanwhile in Genesis 4, the earth cries out when it is stained with Abel's blood, and in Jeremiah 4 and Hosea 4:3, the land mourns.

15 Ched Myers, “The Cedar has Fallen: the Prophetic Word Versus Imperial Clearcutting.” *Earth and Word: Classic Sermons on Saving the Planet*, ed. by David Rhoads (Continuum, 2007) 211-223.

16 Bailey, Elizabeth Tova. *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*. Algonquin Books, 2010.

17 Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005) 267-268.

Perhaps we cannot go back to a view of nature that is quite as alive as the ancients saw it. All the same, we can recognize that nature praises God by being what it was intended to be. A healthy prairie dotted with coneflowers honors its creator. We can also listen to those able to interpret the language of the earth. Watch a farmer examine a field and tell what nutrient his soil is lacking. Walk in the snow with a naturalist and a scuffle in the snow becomes the print of an owl's wing, snatching up a squirrel. Those who pay attention know that the earth *does* speak. It is responsive and able to communicate its activities and needs. With their help, we can learn to hear the praises and laments of other creatures and respond in appropriate ways.

4. Discern what creation has to teach us about God.

Throughout history, Christians have understood God's revelation as coming to us in two ways: through scripture and through nature. This is sometimes called the "two books" theory or the dual view of revelation. Texts commonly used to make this point are Psalm 19, where the heavens declare God's glory and Romans 1:19-20 where Paul argues that what can be known about God is plainly seen in the created world. One could also point to the many nature metaphors used to speak about God and Jesus—rock, wind, water, lamb, for example. Their use implies that we can indeed encounter God through the world outdoors.

People believe that nature reveals a great variety of things about God. Matthew Sleeth's collection of "Teachings on Creation through the Ages" in *The Green Bible* yields such jewels as:

There is no creature so small and abject, but it reflects the goodness of God.

– *Thomas a Kempis (1380 – 1471)*

One blade of grass or one speck of dust is enough to occupy your entire mind in beholding the art with which it has been made.

– *Basil the Great (329 - 379)*

Jonathan Edwards thought that the blue sky spoke of God's mildness and gentleness. The oft-quoted 19th-century naturalist J.B.S. Haldane claimed, with tongue in cheek, that God had "an inordinate fondness for beetles" because there were so many of them. Nature writer David Quammen has wondered what the mating habits of bedbugs might reveal about the divine.

Physicist Stephen Hawking has gone a step beyond Psalm 8's musings about our place in the universe. He says, "We are such insignificant creatures on a minor planet on a very average star in the outer suburbs of one of a hundred thousand million galaxies. So it is difficult to believe in a God that would care about us or even notice our existence."¹⁸ On a more hopeful note, *The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995) weighs in with the conviction that, "the universe has been called into being as an expression of God's love"

While we might feel all of these things at one time or another, from wonder to puzzlement, it is difficult to spend much time in nature without being overwhelmed by a sense of intricacy, interdependence—and love. These are also the qualities that the Christian tradition attributes to the trinity: God the Father, Son and Spirit as a community of beings that indwell each other in mutuality and love.

5. Embrace creation as community and covenant partners.

A persistent streak of rebellion in the Bible refuses to see other creatures as merely commodities. In Job 38–42, this sentiment emerges as a divine rant against the self-centeredness of human beings. In Psalm 104, it bubbles forth in a fountain of joy. In Psalm 19, the human delight in scripture is placed side by side with the sky's wordless declaration of the glory of God. In several texts, including Psalm 148, human praise and nature's praise complement each other. Perhaps most striking of all, in Genesis 9, all living things are included in the covenant God makes with Noah and

18 Quoted in Michael White and John R. Gribbin, *Stephen Hawking: A Life in Science* (London: Viking, 1992) 166.

the other flood survivors. Such texts depict other creatures as companions, covenant partners and mirrors of God's goodness.

Cherokee theologian Randy Woodley suggests that the phrase, "community of creation" would be an appropriate contemporary translation of the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached.

"Community of creation" emphasizes Jesus' continuity with the shalom traditions of the Hebrew Bible and hopefully leaves behind the unfortunate military directions that "kingdom" inspired at some points in Christian history. It also alludes to Christ's role as creator as well as redeemer. In addition, for Woodley, the "community of creation" is an important conceptual bridge between Christianity and the emphasis on harmony that is part of Native American traditions.¹⁹

Mennonites are proud of their potlucks, their support of the sick among them and their sense of community. What would happen if we enlarged this vision to include the trees that suck up our storm water and the moles that aerate our soil? What if we thought in terms of our church property and its non-human inhabitants as part of the congregation and the community? Damaged rivers and declines in songbirds would suddenly become matters of urgent concern. A broken relationship with nature would occasion visits to the pastor, just as a broken relationship with a sibling or parent might. People would study ecology in seminaries and farmers would be commissioned with laying on of hands services.

May it be so!

19 Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2012) 39.

For Discussion

Key Ideas

1. **How do you most often experience the natural world?** Is it:
 - An enticing place of wonder or a bug-infested wilderness that is too cold or too hot?
 - A warehouse of natural resources or a gallery of old friends and happy memories?
 - A backdrop for human activity or a revelation of God's love?
2. **With what parts of the natural world do you connect?** This could be a place, a plant, an animal, a view or something else. What actions would sustain the parts of the natural world that you value most?
3. **If we view the natural world as fellow creatures loved by God,** how do we balance that with the reality that we need to use other species for food, shelter, clothing and medicine? What are appropriate ways of "using" other species?
4. **Do you agree with Woodley that "community of creation" is an appropriate contemporary translation of the phrase, "kingdom of God?"**

Digging Deeper

1. **The opening paragraph of the essay** suggests that we need some understanding of creation as a whole before we consider the human vocation. How might the ideas in this essay reshape your understanding of that role?
2. **How can ecological learning become part of Christian discipleship?** What kinds of ecological learning are available in your area? In what ways might your congregation grow in its wisdom and delight regarding creation?
3. **In what ways has creation taught you about God?** Are you open to learning from this source? What nature metaphors for God or Christ are meaningful to you?
4. **Is praying with, for or within creation part of your spiritual life?** Why or why not?

Local Ecosystem Focus

(Choose one question to explore)

1. **What biome²⁰ 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?
3. **What natural areas are present within your local ecosystem?** What do you know about them? What do you wish you knew? Which of these do you and your class members use?
4. **What plant and animal species inhabit your church property?** Learn their names and a little bit about them.

Suggested Spiritual Practices

Remember to use a prayer of intent such as the one provided in Session 1 to help you focus as you begin.

1. **Select your favorite sections of Psalm 104** and rewrite them, replacing the species and ecosystems the psalmist knew with those found within your local ecosystem. How does this change your understanding of the text?
2. **Find a “waste space” in your area** and pay attention to it, using a camera or nature journal. What surprises emerge?
3. **Visit a natural area** within your local ecosystem that you have never been to before.
4. **Memorize** one or more of the scriptures listed for this session.
5. **Spend time with nature images for God or Jesus:** rock, wind, water, lamb, pathway, etc.
6. **David Kline, an Amish bishop and writer,** reports that the most commonly used prayer book in Amish homes includes “an evening prayer to be read daily.” It includes the line, “Help us not to harm your creatures and creation.”²¹ Make this your own daily prayer.

20 Biomes are large geographical areas of distinctive plant and animal groups, such as grasslands, deciduous forests, deserts, etc. For information on Canadian biomes, see <http://biodivcanada.ca>

21 David Kline, “God’s Spirit and a Theology for Living, in *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 61.

Suggested Household Practices

1. **The monarch butterfly** is in serious decline. Factors include increased pesticide use and loss of hedgerows and other wild spaces that include milkweed (*Asclepias*). This is the only genus of plants that monarch caterpillars can eat. Add some milkweed to your lawn or garden. If you can't find wild seed, native plant catalogs carry varieties of milkweed. Make sure you plant a variety native to your area. Learn more at [Monarch and Milkweed FAQs](#) on the David Suzuki Foundation website.

2. **How can you make your home or church property hospitable to other species?** Insects serve as the base of the food chain, and 90% of them are like monarch butterflies in that they require a specialized diet. They cannot eat peonies from China or zinnias from Mexico any more than we can eat nightshade or poison ivy. While monarch butterflies are popular and easy to see, what is happening to them is happening to many other insects as well, and the birds that feed on them. Learn more about gardening with native plants and shape your garden accordingly. Here are some resources:

[Native Plant Database](#) for Canada

[Native Plant Societies](#) in North America

[Bringing Nature Home](#) Insights from Doug Tallamy, a Delaware entomologist

[Noah's Garden: Restoring the Ecology of our own Backyards](#)

3. **Make a list of household items or foods** that you use daily. Choose one that came from a living thing and trace it back to the creature and ecosystem it came from.

- Learn about this species, independent of its usefulness to humans. What does it need to flourish? What might the author of Psalm 104 have said about it?
- Research the production practices or environmental issues related to this product. Can you lessen your impact by buying fair trade or organic, or making do with less?

Suggested Resources

[Anabaptist Bestiary](#)

This alternative rock group from Bluffton University writes original songs that reflect on earth's creatures and give them a voice. Hear from bees, sloths, beavers and other animals not often featured in popular music. Trevor Bechtel, a religion professor, anchors the group and writes most of the music.

Bouma-Prediger, Steven. *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision of Creation Care*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010.

See chapter 1, "Where are We? An Ecological Perception of Place" and chapter 4, "What is the Connection between Scripture and Ecology?"

Brown, William. *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science and the Ecology of Wonder*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010.

This is an academic book by a biblical scholar who loves science. While some Christians pit the two ways of knowing against each other, Brown sees the sense of wonder that both scientists and theologians share.

Woodley, Randy S. [Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision](#). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012.

This author brings together the harmony traditions of his Cherokee heritage and the shalom traditions of the Hebrew Bible in ways that embrace all of creation.

Stein, Sara B. [Noah's Garden: Restoring the Ecology of our own Backyards](#). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1995.

A former old-style suburban gardener, Sara Stein writes convincingly of the ecological history of suburbia and the necessity of good stewardship of the land stolen from prairies and forests to make our back yards.

Walker-Jones, Arthur. [The Green Psalter: Resources for an Ecological Spirituality](#), 2009.

An Old Testament Scholar and wilderness canoe tripper, Walker-Jones explores important metaphors in the Psalms for elements of creation and traces their influence in contemporary culture.



Session 4:

Finding Our Place in Creation

Scripture: Genesis 1 : 2

Also Recommended: Genesis 3 – 11

Through an Ecological Lens:
Try C and D with Genesis 1.

Scriptures are like medicines.

Carefully applied, scriptures can heal and save lives just like medicines. The wrong remedy, however, or even an overdose of the right one can be toxic. You wouldn't want to pass out nitroglycerin on a street corner.

Genesis 1:26–28 is a particularly potent scripture. Over the past 50 years, it has become one of the most controversial texts in the Bible. Some say that the Christian belief that human beings have been given dominion over the planet is the root of all environmental destruction.²² The assumption that dominion is our right has indeed been absorbed into the Western bloodstream along with a dose of imperialism, technical know-how and greed. It has helped to raze forests and prairies, and push Indigenous Canadians off their lands.²³

22 In 1967, the historian, Lynn White, published a landmark article entitled, *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*, in the journal, *Science*. In it, he argued that Christianity's understanding of dominion helped create the Western thought world that fueled modern environmental destruction. The article has played a significant role in discussions of faith and the environment ever since then.

23 See Biblical Tidbits on page # for examples.

This session offers four suggestions for reading Genesis 1 and 2 in ways that lead to wholeness. Several of them are based on our ecological lens questions from the introductory material.

Consider time and place. (Ecological Lens Question B)

Genesis 1:26–28 is a problematic text because of the force of the two Hebrew words used to describe the human role: *radah* and *kabash*. Critics of these verses point to the fact that *radah* (have dominion) and *kabash* (subdue or conquer) are forceful words in Hebrew, usually referring to conquest of land. *Radah* has the connotation of putting your foot on something. It is important to realize that the original hearers of this text were operating in a very different context than we are. Technologically, their idea of dominion would have involved farming, fishing, herding livestock and building towns. Daily, they lived with a sense of dependence on the natural world and were keenly aware of their vulnerability in the face of drought and disease. Today, our population is over seven billion and our inventions range from open-heart surgery to atom bombs. We are even capable of venturing into space and altering the composition of the atmosphere.

Old Testament scholars consider this context when discerning whether having dominion is an appropriate self-understanding for our times. “Is this image of dominion a legitimate and appropriate one for a society that sees itself as powerful rather than powerless, for a society whose sense of its own power is decidedly different from the biblical society within which this image of dominion arose?” asks Ted Hiebert, writing in a North American context.²⁴

In contrast, Anthony Ceresko, a Catholic priest who taught many years in developing countries, imagines how empowering this text might have been for the Israelites returning to rebuild their broken city following the experience of conquest and exile. He finds it equally appropriate for a developing nation today. “It represents

24 Ted Hiebert, *Rethinking Dominion Theology*, Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum. Fall 1996, Vol. 25, #2, 16-25.

a powerful statement about our potential as individuals but more especially our possibilities as a community blessed by and invited by the Creator to share in the work of establishing and ordering the created world,” he says.²⁵ A teenager who lives in a downtrodden neighborhood, meanwhile, might build a sense of self-worth on these verses as she realizes that she can make a difference in her community.

The radical equality proclaimed in Genesis 1:26–28 is also lost on us today. In the Ancient Near East, people believed the gods created humanity to serve as their slaves. Only kings were understood to be images of the gods, ruling in their stead and making laws that represented the will of the gods. Genesis 1 plays off of this idea with a shockingly democratic turnabout. *All* people serve as the image of God? *Women* are made in the image of God? One wonders if copies of this text didn’t land in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego. Nevertheless, we need to recognize that despite the rich meanings these dominion verses may have in certain contexts, they are likely to be misunderstood and abused in others.

Read Genesis 1 in the context of the larger biblical story.

We do not have just one creation story; we have two, and they function as complements. Genesis 1 is regal and liturgical; Genesis 2 is earthy and smells like a campfire. In Genesis 1, humans are told to rule other creatures; in Genesis 2, humans are made out of the soil like everything else and are told to serve the earth. Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis points out that the Hebrew words used here, *ebed* and *shamar*, translated “till and keep,” are not really agricultural words. The former means to work for someone as a servant or worshipper; the latter can mean *observe* or *watch* as well as *keep*. One keeps flocks, households and laws. To keep a garden is to observe it, learn from it and respect its limits.²⁶ Taken together, the biblical

25 Anthony Ceresko, *Ecology and Genesis 1:26-28: An Interpretative Strategy*, Trends in Biblical Studies, 2005.

26 Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 29-30.

creation stories present a view of human identity that is truthful about our giftedness and the power we wield, but tempered by an emphasis on humility and service.

Secondly, if one reads past Genesis 2, the rest of the Hebrew Bible is clearly a story of *failed* human dominion. Go no further than Genesis 1-11, and it soon becomes clear that Plan A didn't work. Why celebrate human beings as noble rulers or even dedicated servants of the earth when as early as Genesis 3, Adam and Eve exercise dominion by taking bad advice from a snake? By Genesis 6, the entire earth is a violent mess. Davis says the word *dominion* must be heard not as "triumphalism but a poignant irony."²⁷ Genesis 1 is only the beginning of an intriguing dialog on failure and hope; the set-up for a 66-book exposition on dominion disasters and what God did about them.

**Emphasize our place as fellow members
within the web of creation.**
(Ecological Lens Questions A and C)

The Bible says we are made in the image of God. It also says we are like sheep. While commentators have drained rivers of ink pondering the former identity, much less has been written about our sheep-hood. This is a human bias of which we should be aware. We human beings *love* to think about how god-like we are! Just because we have always read the creation of humans as if it were the climax of the creation story doesn't mean that this is the only reading of the text. It may not even be the best reading for our times.

What if we bracket the human verses for a moment and attend to the rest of the passage? We might notice, for example, that this creation story devotes only three out of the 35 verses to human beings. A fisherman in the congregation might point out to us that God speaks to the *fish* before God utters a word to *us*. We might even realize that we share the sixth day of creation with—cows.²⁸

27 Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 62.

28 Barbara Brown Taylor makes this point in a delightful sermon entitled, "The Dominion of Love," pp. 1-87 to 1-90 in *The Green Bible*.

We are also not the only beings given special roles. The earth is called to bring forth plant and animal life, and the sun and moon are told to rule the sky and seasons. Together, humans and animals are given plants for food. We and the animals share the same sustenance and are made from the same substances—God’s breath and soil. Recognizing our place as dependent members within a complex web of relationships is an important antidote to human arrogance.

Seek to know God. (Ecological Lens Question E)

Finally, it is important to hear the invitation in these verses that name us as created in the image of God. They are not a license to pillage; they are a call to practical theology and relationship. If human beings are to serve as representatives of God, it is imperative that they know and understand who this God is and what God values.

If seeking a relationship with God is not for you, neither is this text. If you are not yoked to a worshipping community at present, and if you are not committed to practicing the disciplines that lead us to a fuller knowledge of God, please do us all a favor. Run to the nearest scissors and cut Genesis 1:26–28 out of your Bible. Better a maimed Bible than some of the atrocities committed in the name of God in the past. If, however, you are accountable to a community that is committed to spiritual formation—through worship and study, through service and self-giving love—make the image of God your key to the environmental crisis. Your most important creation care task is to seek to know the character of our Creator.

To be a Christian is to be constantly on a journey toward a more mature vision of who God is and what it means to be the face and hands of God for other people and the planet. Genesis 1:26–28 asserts that the *only* form of dominion that will work and enable us to keep the planet is one that truly reflects God’s intentions. What kind of God are we representing? This question is of utmost importance for any Christian concerned about climate change or soil erosion or pollution.

After Genesis 1-11, the term “image of God” disappears. While “image” is used negatively plenty of times to refer to idols, never again in the Hebrew Bible are human beings referred to as the image of God. No king, no priest, no nation is named as such. This striking phrase does not reappear until the Apostle Paul uses it in Colossians 1:15 and I Corinthians 4.²⁹ “Christ is the image of the invisible God,” he says, quoting a hymn sung by the earliest churches.

I had difficulty sifting through the many competing ideas these rich chapters suggest. One main point eluded me: they were all so important and so interconnected! In frustration, I grabbed my journal and wrote, “What matters most?” at the top of the page. I scribbled random shapes and keywords around the page, closed the notebook and went to bed. The next day, when I looked at the page again, I was startled to see that the way I had written the words “dominion” and “image of God” formed a cross.

For Discussion

Key Ideas

1. **How and when do the creation stories come up in your congregation?** Have you found them helpful in thinking about your identity and sense of purpose? Have they shaped your relationship with creation? Have any of your past interpretations ever caused harm?
2. **What points from the last session on biblical views** of nature seem important to remember as you think about your role on the planet?
3. **The last point in the essay for this session implies** that worship and Christian education are important for Christians concerned about creation care. Has worship nourished your desire to care for the earth?
4. **The last line of the essay for this session describes** a vision of the words, “image of God” and “dominion” in the shape of a cross. How might the experience of crucifixion shape our practice of earthkeeping?
5. **Is caring for the Earth found in the core values** of your congregation? Is it mentioned in missional action plans? Why or why not?

29 Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 55.

Digging Deeper

1. **From what do humans need to be saved?** According to Genesis 1-11, the answer is a.) our violence and b.) our broken relationship with the earth. Support or argue against this statement. Does your community have a vision for keeping the local/regional land healthy? How do you define this health?
2. **What kinds of information do we need today** in order to serve and keep the land? Is that information available in your community? How can discipleship incorporate ecological learning?
3. **Which of the following would you see** as an appropriate use of your congregation's time and resources? Why or why not?
 - Spending money on land preservation or restoration
 - Calling, blessing, and funding a student interested in the intersection of ecology and Christian faith
 - Protesting environmental abuses
 - Adopting a river and holding regular clean-ups
 - Holding a blessing of animals
 - Your idea(s)
4. **What sources other than the Bible do you draw on** when you think about human beings in relation to nature? Do you think modern science's story of origins has wisdom to offer?

Local Ecosystem Focus

1. **Where within your local ecosystem** do participants exercise "dominion" over the land or other natural resources?
2. **What entities** (i.e. landowners, provincial governments, developers, city planners, etc.) within your area exercise the most decision-making power over the landscape? What do they do?

Suggested Spiritual Practices

1. **Bible Study:** Study and reflect upon one of the four points highlighted in the essay—consider time and place, examine Genesis 1 in the context of the larger biblical story, emphasize our place as fellow members within the web of creation, or seek to know God. Alternatively, study and reflect upon Digging Deeper question 1.
2. **Keep the Sabbath:** Along with the responsibility implied in Genesis 1 and 2 is the gift of a day in which we are to let go of duties. We are to simply be in the presence of God and creation. How do you think our environmental predicament would be different if the whole world practiced the Sabbath? For further reflection, read *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight*, by Norman Wirzba. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006.
3. **Learn about a creature** that shares your backyard or church grounds. How does it interact with humans and other species? Give thanks for God's unique creation. Electronic resources such as [Natural Regions](#) enable you to quickly limit your search to a particular region or search for an unknown species based on a description.
4. **Add a Season of Creation** to your yearly worship cycle. Like Advent and Lent, this is a regular four-week series that focuses on God as creator and our relationship with the Earth. See [Let All Creation Praise](#) for ideas. A related resource is *The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary*, by Norman C. Habel, David Rhoads and H. Paul Santmire, eds. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010. This book explains the idea behind the Season of Creation and includes thoughtful theological essays on how including creation reshapes the various parts of a worship service. The second part offers brief commentaries on the texts that are part of the creation lectionary cycle the authors have developed.

Suggested Household Practices

1. **Make your Sabbath a Carbon Sabbath.** This means eliminating or reducing use of fossil fuels one day a week and living within whatever limitations result.
 - For Suggested Resources, see:
 - [Carbon Sabbath](#)
 - [Kairos Canada's Re-energize: Time for a Carbon Sabbath](#)
2. **Exercise dominion** over an area of your household that you have neglected, such as:
 - finding air leaks and weather stripping
 - checking to make sure your tires are properly inflated
 - setting up a recycling system if you haven't already

Suggested Resources:

Resources on the creation accounts abound, but these authors are particularly helpful.

Fretheim, Terence. *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005, pp. 2967.

Fretheim emphasizes the character of God as exhibited in Genesis 1 and 2, and the ways in which God involves humans, earth and other animals in the creative process.

Davis, Ellen. *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Davis begins with the premise that the Hebrew people were small farmers and that their writing reflects this. She is also in dialog with contemporary sustainable farming efforts.



Session 5:

Slow Violence and the Gospel of Peace

Scripture: Luke 19:41-44

Through an Ecological Lens:

Try questions E and F.

“As [Jesus] came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.’”

(Luke 19:41-42)

Violence against creation affects humans.

When the earliest Anabaptists wrote about violence, they spoke as victims, braving fire and sword for the sake of their understanding of the Gospel. When mid-20th century Mennonites wrote about military service, they spoke mostly as bystanders, determined to avoid contributing to the carnage of warfare. Today, being a people of peace is trickier. It is easier to identify with Jesus’ confused contemporaries who “did not recognize the things that make for peace.” It requires the painful recognition that we may be among

Mennonites have a long history as a peace church, but we are only beginning to connect the dots between our commitment to peacemaking and our call to kinship with the earth. In this century, one of the most critical forms of violence we face is violence against creation. This kind of violence affects human beings as well, particularly the poor and the powerless. Learning to recognize “the things that make for peace” in an era of tar sands oil, spent uranium and global warming requires a new set of eyes and a new set of questions. Below are six questions 21st century people of peace need to grapple with, along with a few preliminary thoughts on each.

1. What are the “things that make for peace,” and what do they have to do with creation?

Readers often point to Jesus’ inaugural address at Nazareth in Luke 4:18–19 in order to understand his ministry. An equally helpful strategy might be to ask, “What made him weep?” In Luke 19:41–44, we see Jesus weeping over Jerusalem because the city “did not recognize the things that make for peace.” Jesus doesn’t spell out what things Jerusalem failed to recognize, but judging from his ministry, we can infer they included healing and teaching, sharing of resources and economic justice.

We can also assume that Jesus was working out of a Jewish *shalom* framework when he spoke of peace. *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace—a word with a very broad connotation. Perry Yoder’s book, *Shalom: The Bible’s Word for Salvation, Justice and Peace*, is helpful in unpacking this term. Yoder identifies three meanings of the word, *shalom*, all of which must be present for *shalom* to exist:

- Material wellbeing and prosperity
- Justice
- Honesty, integrity and straightforwardness

Yoder’s book puts a particular emphasis on justice. Using a number of Psalms, he demonstrates that justice is a basic characteristic of God, and that God’s justice is based on providing for those in need

rather than meting out reward or punishment on the basis of merit.³⁰

If peace cannot exist without justice or material wellbeing, it is easy to see how our control over creation plays into the picture. The rich can outbid the poor for the services that nature provides. With their dollars, they can see that land grows coffee for North Americans, not vegetables for local consumption. The rich can afford to send their wastes elsewhere, or can move away from them; the poor cannot.

Consider oil spills in the Niger Delta that devastate biodiversity and the local fishing industry.³¹

Closer to home, a study by [PollutionWatch](#) reports that Toronto's poorest citizens often reside near industrial locations spewing high levels of toxic chemicals.

[Racial minorities](#) are often more likely to live near polluting industries and waste disposal sites, or have lower access to fresh drinking water, than non-racial minorities. For example:

- Residents of [Lincolnton, North Carolina](#), a primarily black community, claim that high rates of cancer have been caused by a garbage dump situated close to them. They have been fighting for years to have the dump removed.
- [Shoal Lake First Nation](#) has provided fresh water to the City of Winnipeg, Man, since 1919, but the community itself has been under a boil water advisory since 1998. In late 2015, local, provincial and federal governments agreed to build a road into the isolated community, which will make the prospect of constructing a water treatment plant more feasible, but at this writing, no firm plans are in place for it.

In each of these cases, creation suffers and poor and minority populations bear the brunt of environmental damage. Deceit and lies are also a refrain in articles on these topics.³² The things that make for peace—material wellbeing, justice and integrity—are not present. If our oil harms fishing communities in the Niger Delta, if our fresh water runs at the expense of children in Shoal Lake First

30 Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1987) 37-38.

31 [Oil Spill Coats River, Sea in Impoverished Niger Delta](#), Al Jazeera, December 2013.

32 The oil spill article in footnote 2 is a case in point.

Nation, and our trash causes cancer, we are not living in peace. If our lifestyles require more land, food and resources than one planet can provide, we are not at peace either.

2. How can we recognize and oppose “slow violence”?

A missile drops on a town and levels the shopping district. Body parts mingle with building debris and flames rip through what is left of the community. In 45 minutes, the town is a charred wasteland. Someone films the carnage and it makes the nightly news.

All of us would agree that this is violence, and nearly all of us would condemn it as against the will of God. But what if the time frame for destruction moves more slowly? What if this same town, over a fifty-year period, experiences the effects of radiation, air pollution or groundwater depletion? People get ill, die, go hungry, or move away, and a thriving community disintegrates. Is this violence also? The effect may be just as devastating, only slower. A child born without legs due to toxins accumulated year by year in the groundwater walks no better than children who lost their legs due to landmines.

In his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon examines the challenges of “seeing” violence that takes place slowly. He looks at examples from the Global South where deforestation, mega dams, oil companies, radiation and other environmental threats ruin lives and livelihoods. He also looks at the strategies local activists have employed to make these forms of violence visible. If we are a peace people who oppose violence, how do we too distinguish the effects of “slow violence” and make them visible?

3. What constitutes violence against nonhuman creation?

Can animals be victims of violence? What about non-living creation, such as a landscape? Although most of us think of human-to-human activity when we use the word, *violence*, phrases such as, “rape of the land,” suggest that we do recognize violence against nature.

Consider these actions, all of which would be murder if they were performed against human beings:

- European settlers slaughter buffalo by the hundreds and leave them to rot, killing them only for sport or because Native Americans depend on them.
- A logging company clear-cuts a forest; then moves on to another area.
- Coral reefs die as the ocean becomes more acidic due to climate change.
- Chickens are slaughtered for meat within six weeks of hatching without ever setting foot outdoors.

Environmental ethicists debate what other life forms count morally,³³ but few laypeople have begun to weigh cases like the ones above. Most congregations wouldn't agree on which things on this list are inconsistent with a peace position, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't debate these kinds of questions. As our population and our technological power continue to grow, it is important that all of us grapple with the line between providing for human need and violence against creation. We at Mennonite Creation Care Network suggest one guideline as a starting point: We cross the line into violence when we damage a system in a way that makes it difficult for regeneration to occur.³⁴

4. How can our peacemaking care for creation? How can caring for creation make peace?

Waging war is the most environmentally destructive activity that humans engage in. In addition to battlefield issues such as landmines and spent uranium, militaries are heavy consumers of fossil fuels and frequent creators of contaminated sites.³⁵ Rich Meyer, Goshen,

33 For a helpful summary of the spectrum of positions such as animal rights, land ethics and deep ecology, see Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2010) 120-129

34 This comment from Luke Gascho is the flip side of Aldo Leopold's land ethic. Leopold states that, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." See Leopold's classic, *A Sand County Almanac*.

35 Clay Risen, *"The Environmental Consequences of War,"* Washington Monthly, January/February 2010. 11 Interview, Mennonite Creation Care Network archives.

Indiana, a long-time volunteer with Christian Peacemaker Teams makes this observation:

One could say any peacemaking effort that decreases the activity of armed forces anywhere has a creation care benefit. This is true whether it was done by cutting military budgets, by de-escalating a conflict so that armed forces stayed in their barracks, or by cancelling some missions through mediation. I would guess that some years, the Eastern Mennonite University Center for Justice and Peacebuilding has saved more fossil fuel through mediation than all the Mennonite agencies use in a year for airline travel.³⁶

Even if peacemakers never say a word about creation care, they are still making a contribution to the health of the planet. Greater benefits might come forth if we did speak, think and write more about the linkages between peacemaking and creation.

Meanwhile, building peace through working together on environmental projects is an emerging field in the secular world.³⁷ This could be an exciting area for some of us to explore. One would hope that shared environmental concerns could strengthen relationships at the congregational level as well. It would be a wonderful thing if people of different political persuasions or ethical positions found unity working shoulder to shoulder in a community garden or a river cleanup.

5. What does peace with creation look like in daily living?

In his book *Fingerprints of Fire, Footprints of Peace*, Noel Moules suggests that “a major mark of a truly spiritual person is that they live in harmony with wild nature.”³⁸ He mentions Jesus being with the wild animals during the temptation and cites the example of various desert mothers and fathers. Moules’ suggestion tracks well with the findings of current environmental research. In his 1984 book, *Biophilia*, renowned scientist E. O. Wilson argued that

36 Interview, Mennonite Creation Care Network archives.

37 For example, see Ken Conca and Geoffrey D. Dabelko, *Environmental Peacemaking*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2003.

38 Noel Moules, *Fingerprints of Fire, Footprints of Peace* (Winchester, UK: Circle Books, 2012). See chapter 6, pp. 79 and following.

humans have an instinctive urge to affiliate with other forms of life. More recently, Richard Louv has shown that direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy child development.³⁹ Humans were designed to live their lives deeply entwined with nature. Thus it makes sense that the shalom that permeates spiritually mature people would include peace with the natural world.

What does a *shalom* relationship with the natural world look like? Based on what we know about healthy human relationships, we can assume it would include delight, intimacy and attachment. Once I attended a gathering where the presenter showed us a picture of a Palestinian woman hugging an olive tree in a war-torn landscape. “Is there any place you love enough to die for?” he asked us. It’s an interesting question to contemplate even if the answer is no. Certainly we are poorer people if we move only between cubicle and strip mall and there are no natural places in our lives that we love. Peace with creation includes feeling safe and at home in the natural world. It includes having outdoor “friends” that we recognize: favorite trees, species of birds, special places. Sensitivity to small changes in an ecosystem might be another characteristic, just as we notice when our friends look ill or cut their hair.

Secondly, peace with creation requires an acceptance of nature’s ways and a willingness to fit in with them rather than to dominate them for our own ends. A friend of mine tells me that at the first sign of an insect, people scamper into her garden shop demanding powerful pest killers. She encourages them to look and see if the plant is damaged. From an ecological perspective, a nibbled plant is doing its job as part of the food chain. It is alarming to read the warlike language marketers apply to farm and garden products.

39 Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*. (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin of Chapel Hill, 2005).

Many of them turn gardening into an all-out war. Consider these sentences from pest control advertisements (bold print mine):

“Herbicides are a key *weapon* in the lawn weed control **arsenal**.”

- “Whether there is a weed **invasion** in your lawn or a weed’s failure to disappear in the driveway, Ortho Weed **Killers** lay down the law. **Take matters into your own hands...**”
- “As the **war** against insects heats up this season, it’s important to have **Warrior** with Zeon Technology® on your side...”

We might laugh off this melodrama as simply a sales pitch, but the language of violence shapes our relationship with nature more than we might like to admit.

6. How does the reconciling work of Jesus Christ relate to creation?

In recent decades, Mennonite scholars have thought deeply about how a peace theology shapes the way we understand the atonement. Less work has been done relating creation and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. What does it mean to take seriously texts such as Colossians 1:15–20 and Romans 8:18–25 which understand Jesus’ reconciling work to include all of creation, not just humans? Hopefully many able minds will embrace these questions. Meanwhile, it is interesting to observe how naturally the New Testament language that describes Jesus’ saving work can apply to the earth in ways that are practical and inviting:

- **Reconcile:** Many of us have relationships with nature that are distant, violent or unjust. This broken relationship affects even children. Richard Louv, mentioned above, argues that nature deficit disorder is linked to obesity, Attention Deficit Disorder and depression.⁴⁰ We need reconciliation with the natural world.
- **Save:** The biblical word for salvation was a literal one that meant to rescue from danger or destruction. It is also

40 Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*.

sometimes translated as *preserve, heal, cure* or *make well*.

Today, one saves whales, rainforests, topsoil and a variety of endangered species. It is not a huge leap to see that when we do these things, we are following the work and way of Jesus.

- **Redeem or ransom:** These words apply equally well to people or land. To redeem was to buy back from slavery or hostile forces. To redeem a property was to buy back land that was sold outside of the family. [Butchart Gardens](#) on Vancouver Island offer an example of redeemed land in Canada. After Robert Pim Butchart depleted limestone deposits on the island, his wife brought in tonnes of topsoil to begin transforming the barren quarry into a place of beauty, and over the years Butchart Gardens expanded and flourished.

I do not mean to deny the more spiritual meanings that many Christians associate with words like reconciliation, salvation or redemption. But we are better equipped both spiritually and practically, if we understand just how down to earth (pun intended) the language of salvation actually is.

Concluding thoughts.

When I read about the vast web of environmental injustice that ensnares all of us, I want to crawl under my petroleum based, VOC-laden, non-recyclable rug. If we truly understand what the Bible means by peace, it is patently clear that our world falls far short of it and that we participate in our society's sins. We can no longer take our place with the Pharisee praying in the temple, extolling our virtuous history and our lack of handguns. We have to slink into the back row with the tax collector and cry, "God, have mercy on me a sinner!" (Luke 18:9-14).

This is not necessarily a bad thing. One common translation of the first beatitude in Matthew 5:8 is, "How blessed are those who know their need of God, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." If the environmental crisis gives us a stronger doctrine of sin, a more poignant understanding of our need for salvation and a better grasp of God's love, that would be good news indeed.

For Discussion

Key ideas

1. **Respond to the idea that seeking peace with creation** requires a shift in our perspective from victims or bystanders to accepting our complicity in an unjust system. Do you see yourself that way? How do you feel about it?
2. **Do you think that “slow violence” is a good way** to describe environmental damage that affects other people? Why or why not?
3. **How is caring for creation part of the holistic good news of Jesus Christ?** What light does this session on peacemaking shed on that question?
4. **Where do you place the line** between providing for human need and violence against creation? Discuss the examples listed under the third question in the essay or draw on local examples.
5. **Peace with creation in daily living:** How would you describe your relationship with creation? Are you at peace? Where is there conflict?

Digging Deeper

1. **What makes you weep for peace?** What do you suppose Jesus was looking at as he rode down the Mount of Olives on a donkey?
2. **How might your congregation’s commitment to peace** guide you as you respond to the environmental crisis? Can you build on peace work you are already doing? Or might creation care lead you to peacemaking?
3. **Caring for creation can be a form of peacebuilding**, drawing people with differences together around a shared concern. Could a weather stripping fest heal simmering rifts in your congregation? What about an interracial community garden in your community?

Local Ecosystem Focus

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

Suggested Spiritual Practices

1. **What forms of environmental damage** or potential hazards are you aware of within your local ecosystem?
2. **Read and reflect on the poem, “Ordinance Plant,”** by Joseph Gascho (located on the curriculum website). Are there similar examples of actions with unnoticed environmental consequences in your own history? Pray or journal about these situations. Pray that any toxins in your present community will be revealed and dealt with.
3. **Praying with waste:** If you have a town dump, contaminated site or other hazard within your local ecosystem, visit that site. Walk, observe and pray in this area.
 - **Spend time with a weeping Jesus:** In a journal or prayer, name the things that make you weep over your city or country today. What “things that make for peace” go unrecognized?

Suggested Household Practices

1. **Locate your local household hazardous waste disposal site.** Learn what items they take and post the schedule for receiving items. Check your house and garage for items such as CFL light bulbs, batteries, oils, paints, pesticides and old medicines. Set up a safe storage area for items on the way to the hazardous waste facility.
2. **Make a list of all the products in your household that contain toxic chemicals.** Can you switch to natural agents or use less of these? Think about when you really need a powerful cleanser or pesticide and when your use of it is just habit. If you want to know what is in the products you use and what studies have been done on these chemicals, see the [*Household Products Database*](#).

Suggested Resources

Article 22, [Peace, Justice and Nonresistance](#). Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, 1995.

The Mennonite Church's confession of faith states that, "The biblical concept of peace embraces personal peace with God, peace in human relations, peace among nations, and peace with God's creation."

Heinrichs, Steve, ed. [Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice and Life Together](#). Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2013.

This unsettling collection of essays includes Native American voices and grapples with white appropriation of Native lands.

Moules, Noel. [Fingerprints of Fire, Footprints of Peace](#). Winchester, UK: Circle Books, 2012.

See especially chapter 4, Shalom Activist and chapter 6, Creation Companion.

Yoder, Perry. *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice and Peace*. Napanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1987.

A brief guide to the Bible's understanding of peace, with a strong emphasis on justice.

Stassen, Glen H. and David P. Gushee. [Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context](#). Downer's Grover, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003.

See chapter 6, The Transforming Initiatives of the Sermon on the Mount, pp. 125-145. The authors are not writing about creation care here, but their approach to the Sermon on the Mount is a thought-provoking contribution to peacemaking.

Stories of Environmental Justice Work

[EcoPeace Middle East](#)

An organization that brings together Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli environmentalists to promote cooperative efforts to protect their shared environmental heritage.

[The Centre for Environmental Health Equity](#)

The Centre aims to improve the wellbeing of communities burdened by inequitable environmental health conditions through research and education. They cite four specific at-risk populations: resource-dependent communities close to predominant industries such as agriculture, forestry, fossil fuels extraction or mining; Indigenous communities, low-income and ethno-racial communities typically in urban settings; and biologically vulnerable populations such as children, pregnant women and older adults.

Smith, Emilie Theresa. [“The Thorn Tree Resistance.”](#) Sojourners Magazine, March 2014.

This article is an example of environmental injustice involving mining in Guatemala. It describes the local people’s faith-based response.

[SWAP: Sharing with Appalachian People](#)

SWAP is a program of the Mennonite Central Committee, which has maintained a long-term presence in three Appalachian locations. The SWAP program is best known for its work with housing issues. The program is also willing to offer learning tours that include a visit to a coal mine and reflection on the mining industry’s impact on this area.



Session 6:

Environmental Disasters, Ancient and Modern

Scripture: Jeremiah 18:11-17

Related Texts: Jeremiah 4:23-28, 9:10

Through an Ecological Lens:

Try questions B and F from with Jeremiah 18:11-17.

The elephant in the room.

While this curriculum directs readers' attention to their local communities, we cannot avoid the international elephant in the room: *climate change*. Since 1896, scientists have been aware that carbon dioxide and other gasses in the atmosphere function like glass in a greenhouse, warming the planet. More recently, they calculated that if atmospheric levels of this heat-trapping gas exceed 350 parts per million (ppm), the global climate will no longer function in the stable way it has for the past 10,000 years. Presently, measurements of atmospheric CO₂ keep ticking upward at the rate of about 2 ppm per year. On May 9, 2013, the official reading from the Mauna Loa Research Center in Hawaii hit 400 ppm for the first time in recorded history. According to analysis of air bubbles trapped in ice cores, this CO₂ reading is about 100 ppm higher than it has been for over 650,000 years.⁴¹

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is an international body that synthesizes climate research and issues reports for policymakers. According to the IPCC report published in September 2013, scientists are clear that the planet is warming. They are also 95% certain that the temperature rise is induced by human behaviors, especially the burning of fossil fuels. The IPCC's 2000-page report synthesized the findings of over 10,000 scientific studies and went through three detailed reviews. It reflects the consensus of 259 authors from 39 countries. Due to the number of people who have to agree, climate scientists tend to view IPCC findings as trustworthy but conservative.⁴²

Climate change is real; human behavior is causing it, and it will bring unprecedented changes to our planet and future humans, animals, and plants. The scope of the problem extends from the composition of the atmosphere to the acidity of the ocean; from melting permafrost in the Arctic to rising sea levels in the tropics; from the strength of typhoons in the Philippines to the length of droughts in Africa. We can't be certain that a single event was caused by climate change, but clear patterns are emerging. As the title of Bill McKibben's book, *Earth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2011), indicates, we are in the process of losing the world as we know it. Anyone pursuing peace and justice in the realm of creation care needs to acknowledge these uncomfortable facts.

Rediscovering environmental loss within our faith tradition.

In one sense, we are in a predicament humans have never faced before. On the other hand, many previous civilizations have been devastated by environmental disasters. They too lost the world as they knew it. While more square kilometers are at stake for us today, and more living things will be affected, *individuals and communities* will experience climate change in ways that have much in common with struggles people faced throughout history.

42 [LiveScience: Four Things to Know About the IPCC's Climate Change Report](#)

For example, Ancient Near Eastern peoples were familiar with drought, erosion, deforestation, overgrazing, wildlife depletion and pollution.⁴³

How much of the planet can one person lose? You can lose your own land, your own community, your own hope, your own life: that's about it. I say this not to minimize the unprecedented scope of our environmental problems, but to suggest that history may hold wisdom for us, despite our outsized dilemmas.

One thing we might do while we are staring glumly into the future is to see if any of those stricken civilizations from the past left us advice. As a matter of fact, at least one of them packed us a time capsule called the Hebrew Bible. Parts of what we call the Old Testament were written down over a six hundred-year period, but they did not cohere into a whole until the Babylonian exile following 587 BCE. This was the year Jerusalem was reduced to rubble by the empire of the day, and survivors became refugees in their enemy's country. It is clear from biblical texts that the Israelites saw the *ruin and loss of their land* as a big part of the tragedy. Hence, it could be argued that the driving editorial force shaping the Old Testament was an environmental disaster. This is the "where are we now?" (*ecological lens question A*) that the scribes were living as they sat sifting through the pieces that are now Deuteronomy and other biblical books of history. Sitting quietly on our shelves, waiting to be re-discovered, is an anthology that struggles to understand God, politics and faith in light of a desolate landscape.

The book of Jeremiah is perhaps the best case in point. Jeremiah is sometimes known as "the weeping prophet." His career as a priest, political adviser and spokesperson for God spanned several turbulent decades surrounding the pivotal year 587 BCE, when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. Jeremiah had the unenviable task of warning his nation of the coming disaster and watching it unfold. At best, his words fell on deaf ears. At other times, he nearly lost his life.

43 J. Donald Hughes covers these and other problems in his book, *Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1994.

Although he was powerless to stop the Babylonian invasion, Jeremiah remained committed to his people, offering words of hope and restoration when all seemed lost.

The book of Jeremiah is difficult to read. It offers us 52 chapters of judgment, anguish and hope tumbled together in a chronology that confuses biblical scholars but probably makes sense to weary activists. People who are going through a long, difficult experience that keeps looping back on itself can probably relate to the repetition and seeming disorder. In Jeremiah, we at least have a companion in catastrophe, if not a set of instructions. His poetry resonates with anyone who has lost a landscape they loved:

Take up weeping and wailing
for the mountains,
and a lamentation for the pastures
of the wilderness,
because they are laid waste so that no one passes
through,
and the lowing of cattle is not heard;
both the birds of the air and
the animals have fled and are gone.
(Jeremiah 9:10)

This kind of mourning over the devastation of the land is a refrain throughout the book.⁴⁴

We cannot woodenly apply words intended for Jerusalem 2,600 years ago to today. All the same, interesting things might happen if we allowed the prophet Jeremiah into our conversations about climate change, placing his words side by side with those of the IPCC.

Something like that happened to Stephen Blackmer, a blogger at Kairos Earth who encountered a sculpture of the prophet Jeremiah when he was a student. Fascinated, he bought a poster of the artwork and kept it for the next 35 years, without knowing who

44 See also 2:7, 4:23-28, 5:23-25, 9:10-11, 12:10-11, 14:1-6.

Jeremiah was. “In all that time, Jeremiah remained as silent as the stone he was carved from,”⁴⁵ Blackmer says. Years later, while exploring how his newfound Christian faith might relate to climate change, Blackmer suddenly began to hear Jeremiah speak. Might he also speak to us? Let’s see what new chords Jeremiah introduces into the conversation.

Jeremiah’s God is a God of judgment.

It would be difficult to find more emotionally offensive words than those attributed to God in Jeremiah 18:13–16. The people’s ways are *evil*. They have done a *horrible* thing. Therefore, their land is a *horror*, and passersby are *horrified*. Can this language still speak to us today, or is such a harsh and punitive God an ancient relic we are all glad to have gotten beyond?

I would argue that the God of judgment portrayed here is not so much punitive as passionate. This God invests deeply in our planet. The people matter; the *land* matters, and therefore divine emotion runs the gamut from lament to outrage. “They have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness... The whole land is made desolate, but no one lays it to heart,” God mourns in 12:10–11. I find these enraged outbursts more appealing than the idea of a bland, neutral being with the emotional range of a Hallmark card. This grieving persona is also a far cry from the vindictive God of many contemporary end time scenarios who is indifferent to the destruction of the earth and eager to crumple it up and move on.

Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim says that in the Hebrew understanding of judgment, God has designed the world so that deeds have consequences. Judgment grows out of the deed itself rather than being an unrelated punishment. In fact, Fretheim takes issue with the way the Hebrew word, *paqad*, is rendered as *punish* in verses such as Jeremiah 21:14. He says a more literal and accurate translation would be, “I will visit upon you the fruit of your doings.”⁴⁶ Logical consequences ensue, with destruction often

45 Stephen Blackmer, “*Jeremiah Lives!*” Kairos Earth, December 4, 2012.

46 Terence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*.

brought about by nature or foreign armies. Still, God is understood to be active in the process.

Judgment is also communal rather than individual. The whole community suffers when wrong is done, including innocent people and the land. It is the imprecise nature of judgment that makes it such an outrage to those trying to prevent it, as we can see from the earful Jeremiah gives God in chapter 12. The Hebrew understanding of judgment aligns well with the ways we are experiencing the effects of fossil fuel overconsumption. “The fruits of our doings” are indeed being visited upon us, but unfortunately, not with drone-like precision. We would not, for example, want to say that New York and New Orleans were hit with devastating storms because especially bad people lived there.

Jeremiah saw his people’s crisis as a spiritual problem.

According to the weeping prophet, the doom bearing down on his people was not to be blamed on the wickedness of the Babylonians or the geography of the Middle East. It was fundamentally a spiritual problem with two roots: idolatry and injustice to the poor. What did his people do wrong? Jeremiah 22:8-9 depicts passersby gossiping about the destruction of Jerusalem:

“Why has the LORD dealt in this way with that great city?” one says.

“Because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD their God, and worshiped other gods and served them,” is the reply.

The charge of idolatry also appears in Jeremiah 18. The chapter builds to a climax in verses 14 and 15, as the author compares God's anguish to that of a jilted lover:

“does the snow of Lebanon leave
the crags of Syron? Do the mountain waters run
dry, the cold flowing streams? But my people have
forgotten me! They burn offerings to a delusion . . .”

A parallel concern runs alongside the accusations of idolatry appearing in Jeremiah 5:28:

"They do not judge with justice the cause of the
orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the
rights of the needy."

Jeremiah 2:34 and 22:16 also express concern for the poor. Meanwhile, in 34:8–22, the charge against the kingdom of Judah is the failure to free slaves on schedule, and chapter 19 describes child sacrifice.⁴⁷

Is there any sense in which climate change is a spiritual problem? Neither energy nor industries nor vehicles are evil in and of themselves, but we sometimes use them to serve false centres of value, and sacrifice our children to keep them supplied with oil. I find the imagery in Jeremiah 18:14–15 contemporary and compelling for several reasons. When Jeremiah asks his questions about snow and mountain waters disappearing, (verse 14) the implied answers are, “Of course not! How ridiculous!” But for us, there is a double irony because now we need to answer, “Yes. Those are signs of climate change.”

47 While the link between worshipping false gods and these kinds of human abuses may not seem obvious to us, Ched Myers, an activist biblical scholar at Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries, suggests that in ancient Israel, the two went hand in hand. According to Myers, Canaanite cults were a form of civil religion that secured political loyalty and facilitated collection of taxes. They were “the ideological mechanism by which the peasantry was bled dry by the ruling class through the sacrificial apparatus.” This is from personal correspondence with Ched Myers.

When I picture “burning offerings to a delusion,” (verse 15) I see the fumes of our power plants and factories mingling with the smoke of ancient sacrifices. When we place the wrong things at the centre of our lives, we are worshipping other gods.

Jeremiah demands repentance.

“Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings,” Jeremiah says in 18:11. Theologian Susan Thistlethwaite said a similar thing in a *Washington Post* article⁴⁸ published in the wake of Super Typhoon Haiyan. The disaster killed over 6,000 people and destroyed or damaged about 16 million homes in Philippines. She called climate change denial a moral evil and urged a theological prescription for what we must do: confess, repent, change. Internet comments were mostly hostile. People nitpicked her science and treated her like a religious nut.

Is climate change denial a sin? If human induced climate change contributes to deadly typhoons, then we have to admit something is wrong when it is easier to find a car with a heated seat than one with good fuel economy. We must also recognize the multiple forms of climate change denial. Some of us are deniers by ideology; others are deniers by apathy or greed or despair. It’s not as if gas stations have special pumps for climate change believers labeled “Emissions free gas.” Many of us who are convinced by the science nevertheless take an “Oh well . . . can’t do much about it” attitude. “What’s the point of turning down the thermostat if there is a new coal-fired power plant opening in China every week?” we ask. Why not apply the same optimism we use when we make a donation to other social problems? Usually we assume our small efforts will do a little bit of good.⁴⁹

Whether we like him or not, Jeremiah offers us a model of fidelity to the truth and courage in proclaiming it. He pushes us to ask questions about sin and judgment that are not common in our

48 Thistlethwaite, Susan Brooks, *‘Super’ Typhoon Haiyan: Suffering and the Sin of Climate Change Denial*, 13, 2013.

49 Mark Dowd makes this point in a blog entitled, *Matter Matters: Christians and Climate Change at Thinking Faith*.

culture. He confronts us with a God who is *not* an “Oh well” kind of a God. While Jeremiah’s message was unpleasant, he was not without hope. During the siege against Jerusalem, this stalwart prophet bought a field in the middle of a war zone. “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land,” he announced (32:1–15). He worshipped a God who permits painful consequences but also brings life out of death.

Questions for Discussion

Key Issues

1. **From what sources have you gathered** your information and attitudes about climate change? Why have you chosen these sources?
2. **What factors influence your response** to climate change? What is at stake for you in this area?
3. **How do you talk with friends and neighbors** whose views on climate change differ from your own? What arguments might carry weight with them?
4. **The authors of Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living** (SPCK Publishing, 2007) believe that “Climate change is not one big, intractable problem but billions of tiny, tractable ones.”⁵⁰ Do you find this statement convincing? Name some of these small, solvable problems in your community.
5. **Energy over-consumption is an issue, but so is energy in general.** Over a billion people do not have access to electricity. This puts limits on available education and health care. Respiratory illnesses from cooking over open fires are a major health concern in the developing world. How do we bring a minimum level of comfort to all people?

Digging Deeper

1. **How did the biblical and theological explorations in Unit 1 prepare you to think about climate change?** Is your take on it any different than it might have been a month ago? Which ideas seem relevant to this particular challenge?
2. **What does the Old Testament Book of Jeremiah add** to the discussion of climate change?
3. **How do you react to Susan Thistlethwaite’s** assertion that climate change denial is a sin that requires confession, repentance and change? Other preachers prefer to use the language of sickness and healing to talk about climate change.⁵¹ Which perspective speaks to you?
4. **Jeremiah 32:35 mentions child sacrifice** as one of the acts that has provoked God’s anger. In what ways do we sacrifice children today as a result of our commitment to fossil fuels?

50 Nick Spencer, Robert White and Virginia Vrobesky, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009) 62.

51 New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing frequently speaks of sickness and healing with regard to climate change.

5. **Jim Ball has written a book entitled, *Global Warming and the Risen Lord*.** What difference does “a risen Lord” make in the face of climate change and our discussions of it?

Local Ecosystem Focus

1. **What are the primary sources of CO₂** within your local ecosystem?
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 local ecosystem** planning for climate change? Are there business or government leaders who are concerned about this?

Suggested Spiritual Practices

1. **Intercession:** Post a picture on your refrigerator to help you remember to pray for humans or animals affected by climate change. The *National Geographic* site has photo galleries that you could download:

[Pictures of a Warming World](#)

[Flood, Drought and Climate Change](#)

2. **Lament:** Review the projected impacts of climate change for your region. (The Leader’s Guide: Local Ecosystem Focus for session 6 provides information on this.) Then go to a natural area you love—or your own backyard—and imagine what it might look like if these impacts come true. Mourn for the losses this change would entail and write a lament for them.
3. **Memorize this sentence:** “I’m a Christian, and I think we should do something about climate change even if it costs us.” Say it to your boss and your city council. Say it to your legislative and parliamentary representatives. Say it to your friends at basketball games and your neighbors at block parties. Write the prime minister. Repeat.
 - Why does it matter that you are a Christian? Politicians tend to respect this voting bloc. They also see Christians as people who network.
4. **Use the ecological lens questions** to explore the primary and related passages from Jeremiah listed with the essay.

Suggested Household Practices

5. **Calculate your carbon footprint.** Try one of the online carbon calculators below to calculate your yearly contribution to the atmosphere. Play with the numbers to see what changes would make the most difference in the size of your footprint. New to this idea? See [Carbon Footprints](#).
6. [Simple Carbon Foot print calculator](#). What's your carbon footprint? The Global Footprint Network offers a calculator with various options to help children or adults analyze their approximate ecological footprint, based on whether they live in Eastern Canada (Ontario) or Western Canada (Calgary).
7. A [Detailed Carbon Footprint Calculator](#) is available to assess carbon footprint based on home, travel and lifestyle options including diet.
 - Additional household practices related to fossil fuel use appear under Session 10, Simple Abundance.
8. **Think justice, not charity.** Sadly, the poorest people create the least CO₂ emissions but often suffer the grimmest consequences of climate change. Give money to an organization that in some way works with climate change, either by helping disaster victims, raising awareness, mitigating effects, etc. If possible, set up an automatic monthly deposit and think of this offering from the first world to those in need of justice, not charity. Tree planting projects, helping low-income people weatherize, health kits for disaster victims, donations to [350.org](#) are just a few examples.
9. **Organize a [voluntary gas tax group](#):** Group members agree to “tax” their gasoline expenditures in recognition that the price we pay at the pump is not the full cost of using gasoline. They meet to pool their money savings and decide where to give it.

Suggested Resources

You'll find no doubters reflected in the list of resources to follow. We didn't think you wanted to read 581 articles. According to an analysis of peer-reviewed scientific literature that was published in the last 20 years, only one out of every 581 articles by scientists rejected a human cause for climate change. [Why Climate Deniers Have No Scientific Credibility](#)

Government Sites

[Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\).](#)

The IPCC is the internationally accepted authority on climate change. This body of scientists from many different nations reviews the scientific literature on climate change and issues reports every few years. The latest report year is 2014. The reports cover the physical science basis of climate change, likely impacts and mitigation. While the reports the IPCC generates are thousands of pages long, their site does a good job of explaining what they do and summarizing results.

[NASA Global Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet.](#)

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration studies Earth from space. This site reviews key indicators of climate change and its effects. If you like technological solutions, you'll appreciate their [Energy Innovations](#) page. Read about things like artificial photosynthesis and wind generators that fly loose like kites, never mind the tower.

[Climate Change Basics](#)

The David Suzuki Foundation explains [Climate Change Basics](#) and explores various responses to it.

[The World Wildlife Fund: Ocean Conservation.](#)

The WWF campaigns for the protection of oceans, studies current ecological issues, and develops sustainable approaches to fishing and aquaculture. This is particularly relevant for Canada, which borders the Pacific, Atlantic and Arctic oceans for the world's longest coastline.

[Canadian Government Action on Climate Change.](#)

Learn about the Government of Canada's responses to climate change.

[Climate Action Network.](#) The Climate Action Network explores the impact and extent of climate change in Canada, offers a variety of responses, and reports on the government's response to climate change.

Christians on Climate Change

Ball, Jim. *Global Warming and the Risen Lord: Christian Discipleship and Climate Change*. Washington, D.C.: Evangelical Environmental Network, 2010.

Ball links his family's experience with the Civil Rights Movement to climate change in a thought provoking fashion. His focus on Jesus Christ risen pulsates throughout the book creating positive energy where many despair.

[Canadian Council of Churches: Climate Justice.](#)

The CCC closely associates climate justice with initiatives for peace and social justice. In 2015, it held a [Justice Tour](#) exploring the connections between them. Their climate justice page provides links to a wide array of support material, from interfaith resources to theological reflections.

Hayhoe, Katharine, and Andrew Farley. *A Climate for Change: Global Warming Facts for Faith-based Decisions*. New York, NY: FaithWords, 2009.

Hayhoe is a climate scientist; Farley is a pastor from Texas. Together, they are well equipped to help Christians think through climate change and respond with action.

[Lausanne Global Consultation on Creation Care.](#)

In 2012, representatives from 26 countries met and named creation care an urgent issue for Christians. They call for prayer, simple lifestyle, robust theological work, and mobilization of the whole Church. This document influenced the creation care resolution that MCCN proposed to the Mennonite Church USA in 2013, generating the Every Creature Singing curriculum.

Spencer, Nick, R. S. White, and Virginia Vroblesky. *Christianity, Climate Change, and Sustainable Living*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009.

The authors present a strong biblical case and an engaging, hopeful approach to sustainable living. This book emphasizes the local causes of climate change and the lifestyle changes that can make a difference.

Business and Industry

Here are just a few industries that are being challenged to rethink “business as usual” due to climate change.

[Exxon Mobile: Climate Policy](#)

What does a large multinational oil company say about climate change? The company’s public position since 2002 has been to acknowledge the problem. However, Exxon has funded organizations that deny climate change behind the scenes since then. See how they are [reducing greenhouse gasses](#) in their own operations.

[Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers](#)

The CAPP homepage states: “Responsible development requires that the health and safety of employees and the public come first and demands strong environmental performance.” It also acknowledges that air quality “is an important factor in the quality of life in Canadian cities . . . , it is important to take steps now to ensure that air quality is protected into the future.” The site also includes a helpful [FAQ](#) page responding to questions about the industry.

[Institute for Climate Change and Agriculture, Cornell University](#)

This institute “facilitates research, education and outreach to reduce the agricultural sectors’ collective impact on the climate, and help farmers to become more resilient to climate change.”

[Farming in a Changing Climate](#)

This book by Ellen Wall, Barry Smit and Johanna Wandel, published by UBC Press, explores what climate change means for Canadian agriculture, synthesizing 20 years of research.

[Insurance in a Climate of Change.](#)

The insurance industry has had an organization devoted to this issue since the 1990s. This site is juicy reading for risk management fans; a bit dry for the rest of us.

[The Threat to Fisheries and Aquaculture from Climate Change.](#)

Fish is the primary source of animal protein for a billion people worldwide. The effects of changing temperatures, precipitation and stronger storms on fisheries are a serious concern.

Other

[350.org.](#)

This advocacy organization takes its name from the recommended maximum carbon dioxide level: 350 parts per million. Founder Bill McKibben's calls to resist the Keystone Pipeline and divest from owning fossil fuel stocks have engaged a number of Christian denominations.

[Fossil Free Canada.](#)

This national campus-based fossil fuel divestment movement connects nearly thirty student divestment campaigns across Canada, and pressures institutions such as universities to divest from fossil fuel companies.

[Fossil Free Faith.](#)

Canada's Interfaith Divestment Network provides educational resources and connections to other faith-based divestment initiatives.

[Chasing Ice.](#)

This sobering but beautiful documentary features photographer James Balog's mission to record the melting of glaciers with cameras. It is available for viewing on Netflix Canada.

[The Psychology of Climate Change Communication.](#)

This is a free online guide from the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions. It can help you communicate about climate change.



Session 7:

Hearing from the Global Community

Scripture: Ephesians 2:14-22

Through an Ecological Lens:
Try questions B and E.

Unexpected perspectives.

When we hear people from other cultures and countries talking about issues related to the environment, their perspectives often surprise us.

“Are you noticing climate change in your country? How is it affecting your people?” I asked my friend, Yasir, on his last visit to North America. Yasir is from the city of Khartoum in the Sudan.

“Yes, we are seeing it. The strong savanna is becoming weak savanna, and the weak savanna is becoming desert. More women are being raped.”

Rape? I knew the effects of climate change were wide-ranging, but I wasn’t getting the connection to violence against women.

“Yes, the women have to go further and further to gather firewood. When they scatter like that, they are more vulnerable to roving bands of men. So there is more rape. “

My friend Ruth, who teaches English in China, tells me I must visit her city to understand how important work on behalf of the earth is. She describes the lack of bird song and the hacking coughs people live with from the constant fog of air pollution.

Recently, Ruth hosted a group of Chinese middle school children on a tour of the United States. “The group was shocked by our road kill here,” she told me. I looked at her blankly.

“Yes, they don’t have road kill where they come from.”

“Why? Not enough cars?”

“No. Plenty of cars: not enough animals. The little animals are all gone.”

Joanne Moyer, a member of Mennonite Creation Care Network’s council, shares tantalizing stories about her research in Kenya. According to Joanne, the North American debate that pits the environment against people’s economic well-being looks very different in Kenya.

“Problems like deforestation and climate change are so widespread and urgent there,” she explains. “People worry about how they will cook their food and what they will use to build their houses as the forests disappear at alarming rates. . . . We in North America have the luxury of debating the importance of environmental issues. This is not the case for everyone.”

Each of these three vignettes offers an intriguing window into another world. Hearing them makes me feel like I am peering through a crack in one of the dividing walls that the Apostle Paul describes in Ephesians 2. He says that Christ came and proclaimed peace to two groups distant from each other, making both groups members of the household of God. While I don’t feel hostility toward the nations mentioned above, my attention is directed away from Chinese cities and Sudanese wood gatherers. Walls loom between us.

Why break down a wall? A broken wall is good news when you want or need something on the other side of it. If Europeans enjoy a standard of living similar to North America but consume about

half as much carbon per person,⁵² wouldn't we want to know how they're doing that? If our lifestyles contribute to a rape problem in the Sudan, we need to know that too and feel it in our guts. And what a breath of fresh air a Kenyan could inject into our tired debates pitting the environment against the economy!

Walls between people can also affect the earth. I saw this during a workshop I attended while visiting Phoenix, Arizona last summer. The presenters discussed the effect of the U.S.-Mexico border wall on the local ecology and showed pictures of animal migrations interrupted by the wall. They also told about the many environmental laws that are waived in the name of national security. We saw pictures of vehicle damage to fragile desert soils due to the constant surveillance along the wall.

Paul's dividing walls sound like they're topped with barbed wire and patrolled by armed guards too. Yet we know from other scriptures that some of the hostility Paul talks about was addressed through ordinary decisions made at the dinner table. Day by day, Jews ate with Gentiles and Gentiles gave up eating meat offered to idols for the sake of their communities. Sometimes our own walls are just as surmountable. Things as simple as a quality website, clear instructions, or the right contact person can be enough to boost a seeker over the wall into a much-needed cross-cultural exchange.

What I find most exciting about Ephesians 2 is that the pieces of the wall don't disappear; they are transformed. A new synthesis replaces the division, using the raw materials from each side. No one is left out; opposing camps are forged into a living, growing building that serves as a home for the Spirit. "Under no circumstances can we claim to have Christ on our side alone," says Marcus Barth in his book, *The Broken Wall*.⁵³ Rather, Christ serves as a keystone that joins the two sides of an arch, allowing them to bear weight and form a doorway.

52 Contrast [World Bank CO2 Emissions per Capita](#) with a quality of life indicator, such as the [OECD Better Life Index](#). And here's a story to go with it: [What Makes Europe Greener than the U.S.?](#)

53 Marcus Barth, *The Broken Wall* (Regent College Publishing, 1959).

For Discussion

Key Ideas

1. **Do you find Paul's image of a broken wall** inspiring, appealing or naïve? Why?
2. **What "walls" prevent you from hearing** from the global community on creation care issues? Which of these would be within your power to break down?
3. **What opportunities does your congregation have to interact directly** with people from international locations? Make a list of questions you would like to ask them related to their use of natural resources. Also list comments you've heard from internationals about North American use of resources.
4. **Are there dividing walls within your congregation related to environmental issues?** Name them. How can you work together toward common goals in spite of these walls? What would it take to transform them? How is community life affected if these walls are never discussed?

Digging Deeper

1. **Are international environmental issues covered** in the news sources you read? What issues are you aware of through the Church press? Where are some good places to find world environmental news?
2. **The essay mentions the U.S. Mexico border as a wall** with consequences for surrounding ecosystems. Can you think of other examples of human dividing walls that have caused environmental damage? Walls need not be made of stone or barbed wire to cause harm.
3. **Have you ever been involved in breaking down or transforming** a harmful wall? What feelings did you have? Did the action create fear or hope? What insights do you feel you have to offer the body of Christ because of your stance on a particular environmental issue?

Local Ecosystem Focus

1. **Are there ethnic groups different from yours living** within your local ecosystem? Who lives where? What about 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.

Suggested Spiritual Practices

1. **Listening to the global community:** For one week, suppose that hearing global voices on issues related to creation care is your priority.
 - Whom will you talk to? What information avenues will you pursue? What messages from this other world challenge you? Pray for someone on the other side of a wall.
2. **Listening to opposing perspectives nearby:** For one week, suppose that hearing nearby voices that you disagree with on a particular issue related to creation care is your priority.
 - Whom will you talk to? What information avenues will you pursue? What messages from this other world challenge you? Pray for someone on the other side of a wall.

Suggested Household Practices

1. **Navigate household conflicts:** Even the most amiable households can have disagreements about what creation care steps to implement. Conflicts over who is going to drop off the recycling or whether to buy organic vegetables can discourage doing anything at all. Discuss any such tensions at your house this week. Do you understand the other person's position? Can you find common ground?
2. **Map your consumer goods:** Unseen hands around the world pick our vegetables, sew our clothes and wire our electronics. Walk around your house checking labels. Make a list of where items in your house came from. Pick one or two products you regularly buy and see what you can find out about the country they came from or the industry that produced them there. Even not finding any information tells you something.
3. **Develop Fair Trade brand loyalty:** Read about Fair Trade products and practices at one or more of the sites below. Note that Fair Trade certification requires companies to meet a number of [standards](#), not just fair wages. You probably already know about Fair Trade coffee, but did you know you can also get Fair Trade certified shoes, clothing, basketballs, lotions and more? Find an item you would like to buy fair trade and do the math. What would it cost you per year to make the welfare of the community that produces this item a priority? What adjustments would you need to make in your consumption habits?
 - [Fair Trade Canada](#)
 - [Ten Thousand Villages](#)

Suggested Resources:

[Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love.](#)

This two-page handout from the CommonWord website outlines guidelines for discussions when people do not agree.

Daneel, Marthinus, *African Earthkeepers: Wholistic Interfaith Mission*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001.

This book describes a movement within the African Independent Church in Zimbabwe.

[Indigenous People's Restoration Network.](#)

What is traditional ecological knowledge and why is it important today? This site, representing a working group of the Society for Ecological Restoration, will bring you up to speed on that question.

Kingsolver, Barbara. *Flight Behavior: A Novel*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012.

This popular novel explores environmental issues involving monarch butterflies from the perspective of a working-class woman from West Virginia struggling to make ends meet.

Longacre, Doris Janzen, with Valerie Weaver-Zercher, ed. [Living More with Less, 30th Anniversary Edition.](#) Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010.

Don't miss chapter 6, "Learn from the World Community," pages 49-60. This section reports on what people from around the globe had to say when invited to offer suggestions to North Americans on how to live more simply.

[Lausanne Global Consultation on Creation Care.](#)

In 2012, representatives from 26 countries met and named creation care an urgent issue for Christians. This international body called for prayer, simple lifestyle, robust theological work, and mobilization of the whole Church. Their document influenced the MCCN resolution.

Why Traditional Knowledge Holds the Key to Climate Change.

This is an article about the importance of learning from traditional peoples living on the margins of society.



Session 8:

Claiming Our Citizenship

Scripture: Ephesians 2:19-20, Luke 19:1-10

Related Texts: Acts 22:22-29, Letter to Philemon

Through an Ecological Lens:

Try questions E and F with Luke 19:1-10.

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”

(Ephesians 2:19-20)

Who are we as citizens?

It is a wonderful thing to be a citizen of a country: to belong somewhere, to be welcome in the workplace, to claim a niche in the community and to cross boundaries without fear. With recent mass outpourings of refugees and asylum seekers from Africa and Middle Eastern countries, this blessing becomes more apparent. Many congregations support immigrants or refugees as they struggle to obtain Canadian residency or citizenship, and witness the tears, anxiety, struggle, and expense endured to obtain it. When the long wait without income or peace of mind is over, it is always a cause for celebration!

The challenge of these newcomers is a reminder to consider both the privilege and the responsibility of our citizenship and to allow our Kingdom citizenship to inform how we carry out our Canadian citizenship.

If we are going to claim citizenship in Christ, let us remind ourselves what that looks like. In Ephesians 2:19, part of the text covered in session 7, Paul speaks of Christians as “citizens of the household of God.” Elsewhere, he speaks of us as members of a body. In session 3, we mentioned Cherokee theologian Randy Woodley as one of a number of ecologically minded Christians who believe that “the community of creation” is a helpful contemporary paraphrase of the Kingdom of God language in the New Testament. Whether we call it a kingdom, a community, a body or a household, citizenship in Christ has these characteristics:

- The household of God is a socially and politically untidy place. We are apt to run into people from the wrong side of whatever boundaries matter to us and are expected to work and worship with them.
- The household of God aligns us with children and the poor. It aligns us with prostitutes and repentant tax collectors. All these are said to be entering the kingdom ahead of mature, middle class, respectable people.⁵⁴
- The household of God includes creation. Nations may treat the natural world as little more than a factory to supply human need. But in the household of God, each part of creation is brought into being by God’s presence, beloved by God, and responsive to God.

This latter point frees us to be enthusiastic citizens of particular places. We are citizens of watersheds and mountains; citizens of plains and deciduous forests; citizens of mesas and valleys and deserts, all in need of our heartfelt loyalty. In Christ, the reconciler of all things, we are no longer strangers to the landscapes we inhabit. We are no longer alienated from other species but recognize their pain and their praise. If we see ourselves as citizens of the community of creation, it transforms our loyalties and our

54 See Matthew 19:13-15, Luke 6:20, Matthew 21:31

responsibilities. We can be passionately loyal to our geography, if not always to our government.

How do citizens of Christ speak to their governments?

What biblical stories might inspire and nurture our witness to city, state and national governments? When I first pondered this question, I searched in vain for a text that would encourage Christians to write polite letters to their political leaders and to attend town meetings. It seemed that in the ancient world, speaking truth to power was a contact sport. Lions snarled hungrily at me from the book of Daniel. A distraught Esther marched off to the palace, one scepter away from death. Palace thugs dropped Jeremiah into a pit and John the Baptist lost his head due to a woman's revenge. If you're prepared to engage in civil disobedience on behalf of truth and justice, you have all the biblical grounds you need.

Thankfully, there are other starting points for those of us who find witnessing to our neighbors difficult, let alone our governments. As I worked on this session, my colleagues at Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center nudged me to think more broadly about what it means to take a political stance. "All of us are influencers, and we can all learn to use that influence more effectively," Luke Gascho, our executive director, told me. Luke teaches a course in leadership for our graduate students, so he sees a wide array of people gingerly learning to lead. He says that we need to find the forms of leadership that are authentic to the person we are.

"Even the most harmless actions can still have a political effect," Dave Ostergren, who teaches our policy courses, told me. He related a story about a congressman who changed his mind on an issue because a friend shared a conviction with him at a basketball game.

With this advice in mind, let's revisit the New Testament and consider just a few of the political acts found there.

Sharing a meal. (Luke 19: 1-10)

Most of us remember Zacchaeus as the “wee little man” we encountered in children’s Sunday school. We were all glad that Jesus got this sorry outcast out of a tree and befriended him. Actually, there was a reason Zacchaeus was not an object of pity among Jews in his own time. That wee little man was “very rich” and a chief tax collector. This indicts him as deeply involved in the corrupt tax system of the Roman government and the extortion that it bred. Jesus not only crosses political lines to eat with Zacchaeus; he likely brought his consistent concern for the poor with him to the table. When salvation comes to Zacchaeus’ house in verse 9, it also comes to the needy taxpayers who will now receive a share of Zacchaeus’ wealth.

Grasping a vision, seeing a need. (Matthew 21:12-17)

Never mind for the moment the courage that Jesus needed to overturn tables, shoo animals out of the temple and incur the wrath of the establishment. Consider this story first of all as an act of vision. Hundreds of people walked through the Jerusalem temple every day and saw only business as usual—doves cooing, coins tinkling, moneychangers making a buck. This is how it had been as long as they could remember.

Before there was any need for courage and action, there was a need for eyes to see what was wrong. Drawing on Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, Jesus envisioned the temple as a house of prayer, where the blind and the lame could come for healing. (They are mentioned in Matthew 21:14, but they are not supposed to be there according to Jewish law.)

Challenging a friend. (Philemon and other Pauline letters)

The Apostle Paul got quite a few letters written in between shipwrecks and prison terms. They were penned to churches, not political figures, but that doesn't mean they didn't address local politics or challenge powerful people. While Paul doesn't overtly condemn the institution of slavery, it is clear that he sees Onesimus as much more than a slave, and expects Philemon to value him as well. "Welcome him as you would welcome me," Paul says.

Using our rights for justice. (Acts 22:22-29)

The Apostle Paul says little about his Roman citizenship. Despite the honor and special privileges it entailed, he never mentions it in his letters. Nevertheless, twice in the book of Acts, he makes use of this birthright.

"Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen?" Paul queries in Acts 22:25 as a centurion is tying him up in preparation for a beating. They both know it isn't, and the penalty for flogging a Roman citizen without a trial is stiff. Earlier, in Acts 16:37, Paul also uses his citizenship to demand just treatment. His Roman pedigree ultimately gets him a free trip to Rome to appeal to the emperor and to fulfill his goal of visiting the church in Rome.

On May 1, 1975, Mennonite Central Committee Canada opened an advocacy office in Ottawa, close to Parliament Hill. This office connects with the Canadian government and advocates for policies that support MCC work in relief, development and peacebuilding. It also keeps Canadians informed about current political issues and offers suggestions for getting involved.⁵⁵ Like Esther, who found herself uniquely placed "for such a time as this," they choose to not keep silent in the face of violence and injustice.

55 Contact Mennonite Central Committee's [Ottawa Office](#) to learn more about this history.

Christians have a heritage that inspires political witness. We have been given a vision of a community rooted in shalom for all creatures. Our tradition trains us to align ourselves with children, the earth and the poor. Here in North America, we are blessed with freedom of speech and the right to choose our representatives. We have opportunities for education and communication about which many in other parts of the world can only dream.

How can we be silent?

For Discussion

Key Ideas

1. **How do you see yourself in relation to the land and community** you currently inhabit? Are you a citizen, an alien, a settler, an immigrant, a tourist or something else? How does this identity affect your sense of responsibility for the land?
2. **If you were going to invest your time** in changing a policy related to environmental justice or creation care, what issue would you choose? Why? How would you proceed?
3. **Which of these habits do you have?**
 - ___ reading the newspaper
 - ___ voting in local elections
 - ___ following public issues
 - ___ participating in community groups that benefit the common good
 - ___ volunteering beyond the walls of your congregation
 - ___ serving on a city council, school board or other decision-making bodies
 - ___ contacting political representatives about matters that concern you
 - ___ engaging in civil disobedience if all else fails

How did you develop these habits, or what prevented you from developing them? How have you encouraged these practices in other people?

Can you think of ways to broaden the habits you have to include attention to the health of the environment? For example, if you tutor at-risk children, have you thought about how air quality or environmental hazards in their neighborhoods might be affecting them?
4. **What internal or external barriers keep you from participating** in decisions related to land, water or air quality in your community?
5. **In what ways is your congregation a public witness** to God's love for creation? How might you help outsiders understand these actions? For example, suppose you have turned part of your church lawn into a patch of native prairie grasses. Is there signage explaining what's growing there and why?

Digging Deeper

1. [What do Mennonites believe about speaking to governments?](#) Read and discuss some historical political actions by Mennonites.
2. **How can your congregation enable** those in your community who need a spokesperson to advocate for their own need for clean water, clean air, healthy soil, healthy food, etc.?

Local Ecosystem Focus

1. **What organizations within your area** are responsible for overseeing the environmental health of the area? What do they do?
2. **How does one gain input** into these groups?

Suggested Spiritual Practices

1. **Intercessory prayer:** Pray for a local environmental governing body. Learn the names of the people who are part of this body.
2. **Biblical models:** Spend time with one or more of the texts related to citizenship or political action in the essay. Apply the ecological lens questions.
3. **Read Martin Luther King Jr.'s [Letter's from a Birmingham Jail](#)** devotionally. Who is speaking these words to you today? Do you have a calling to any kind of direct action on behalf of the planet?
4. **Monitor yourself:** If you are a person with pronounced opinions about environmental issues, spend this week paying attention to the comments and assumptions you make about people and groups who disagree with you. Refrain from the following, or note when you do them:
 - Making stereotypical or demeaning comments about your opponents.
 - Watching media that polarizes issues or demonizes “the enemy.”
 - Allowing comfortable assumptions to replace careful thought.
5. **Write your own pledge of allegiance:** Read Ellie Schoenfield’s poem, “[Patriotism.](#)” In it, she describes her loyalty to the soil. Play around with creative ways to state where your allegiance lies.

Suggested Household Practices

1. **Remember this sentence from Session 6?** “I’m a Christian, and I think we should do something about climate change even if it costs us.” Say it to your boss and your city council. Say it to your political representatives. Say it to your friends at basketball games and your neighbors at block parties. Repeat again.
2. **Take a walk** around your own neighborhood or your congregation’s neighborhood with a small notebook in hand, and make a list of all the policies you encounter that affect the care of creation. For example:
 - Houses must meet building codes that make them more or less efficient.
 - Someone had to decide how to handle the storm water from the street.
 - Some cities have weed ordinances that limit what can grow on a property.
 - Do you question the wisdom of any of these policies? Do you see a need for policies that don’t exist?
3. **Choose a new source of news** to follow on a regular basis that could help you become a better caretaker of creation. See Suggested Resources for options.
4. **Write a letter** to an elected official expressing your views on a creation care issue that concerns you. Politicians consider one voice to represent about 100 people. See Mennonite Central Committee’s [How to be an Advocate](#) for tips and adapt their suggestions to a Canadian context. Could your household make advocacy a weekly practice?
5. **Post guidelines:** Write these three questions on a card and post them near where you watch or read news. Use them to help you evaluate political issues that come by you.
 - Are people speaking on their own behalf for policies that benefit only themselves, or are they seeking the common good and particularly the good of the poor and the vulnerable?
 - Are people considering a given policy’s effects on creation as well as on humans when they support it?
 - Can those involved envision their political enemies as part of the solution?
6. **Encourage someone:** Write a kind note to someone whose ecological leadership, business or farming practices you respect.

7. **Start a public affairs club** for high school students or young adults in your community. Include an environmental justice focus. According to a study by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, youth who do not attend college have fewer opportunities to learn civic engagement than their college-attending peers do⁵⁶. This often excludes their voices from the public arena.

56 Constance Flanagan, et. al. [*Civic Engagement and the Changing Transition to Adulthood*](#).

Suggested Resources

Here are two sites that can help you keep up with climate change news and legislation:

[Climate Action Network.](#)

The Climate Action Network explores the impact and extent of climate change in Canada, offers a variety of responses, and reports on the government's response to climate change.

[Citizens for Public Justice](#)

is a national organization of members inspired by faith to advocate for justice in Canadian public policy. They describe Public Justice as “the political dimension of loving one's neighbour, caring for creation, and achieving the common good.”

[Eco-Justice Notes.](#)

Weekly missives bring a theological eye to current events related to human justice and earth justice.

Schoenfield, Ellie. “[Patriotism](#),” *Dark Honey: New & Used Poems*. (Clover Valley Press 2009).

In this poem, Schoenfield describes her loyalty to the earth, particularly the soil.

[The Politics of Jesus Simplified.](#)

A kind Australian has provided us an online summary of the classic by John Howard Yoder that establishes the political nature of Jesus' ministry and his relevance for social ethics.



Session 9:

Rethinking the Market Economy

by **Jerrell Ross Richer**

Mennonite Creation Care Network invited Dr. Jerrell Ross Richer to write this session that explores the ways our theology might shape our view of economics. Professor Richer teaches courses in environmental economics, economic development and business ethics at Goshen College and recently spent three years leading Goshen's Study Service Term program in Peru, along with his family.

Scripture: Matthew 6:24-33

Related Texts: Ezekiel 34:18, Mark 4:1-20

Through an Ecological Lens:

Try questions B and C with Matthew 6:24-33.

A vision from the past.

The year was 1977. The place was Green Mountain High School in Lakewood, Colorado. It was a cold winter afternoon, and I was sitting behind a desk in social studies class. I remember listening to my social studies teacher describe communism and the dangers he perceived of the cold war.

I was an impressionable boy and that night I had a dream. In my dream I found myself living in Moscow in the former Soviet Union, working for the communist party, of all things. I had quietly climbed the ranks of the party structure, waiting to arrive at

a position of power. I was now one of the leaders of the party, an insider with the respect of my comrades and the authority of my position. And soon would come the moment of truth: the moment when I would use my position to speak the truth about Soviet-style communism, exposing its evil deeds and authoritarian nature and bringing down the system from within. Do you ever have dreams like that? Dreams where telling the truth is all that is needed to bring about transformation?

Strangely enough, my childhood dream has come true, though it is different in significant ways. The place is not the Soviet Union; it is North America. The time is not the cold war era; it is right now. And the system whose weaknesses and failures I am exposing is not communism. It is what I fear has become a sort of national religion here in North America: economics.

Fast forward to today: I'm in a classroom again. But this time I'm the one standing in front of the blackboard. It's the first day of class, and I'm explaining the basic assumptions of mainstream, neoclassical economics, which include:

- *Scarcity:* there are never enough resources to go around
- *Non-satiation:* we are never satisfied; more is always better
- *Self-interest:* we only care about ourselves
- *Self-sufficiency:* we are independent and capable of caring for ourselves

I point out to my students that if this is the world in which we live, then the path is very clear. We all want more, but there's not enough to go around, so let the competition begin. You might call this an updated version of the survival of the fittest.

But I wonder: is this worldview true, or is it a self-destructive myth?

- Are we, alone, capable of taking care of ourselves?
- Are we—should we—be interested only in our own wellbeing?
- Do we really not have enough resources?
- Would having even more make us better off?

Let me ask this question: How many of us will not get enough to eat for lunch today? How many of us would really be better off if we added to our meal another cheeseburger, an extra burrito or an additional helping of mashed potatoes?

For some of us, the problem is not that we have too little to eat, it's that we eat too much. It is not that we don't have enough clothing to wear; it's that we have so many clothes that we can barely fit everything inside the drawers of our dresser. It is not that we don't have enough personal mobility; it's that we spend so much time in our cars, driving so fast to get where we need to go on time that traffic accidents have become a leading cause of fatalities.

For too many of us, the problem is not that we didn't give and receive enough gifts for Christmas, birthdays and anniversaries. Rather, it's that we spent so much money buying gifts last year that we'll need most of this year to pay off our credit card balances. For others, the problem is not that we don't have enough diversions to distract us from our daily routines; it's that we are addicted to them. We survive the drudgery of our everyday lives by living for the next weekend, the next drink, the next pill or the next trip to the shopping mall.

Indeed, plenty of people among us do not have enough food, drink or clothing. This inequality persists because either those in need have not been willing to share this with us or the rest of us have not been faithful in sharing our abundance with them. Either way, there is a problem. But the fact remains that for many of us, perhaps most of us living in North America today, *excess* presents more of a problem than *scarcity*. It is this excess that accelerates the depletion of national resources and the contamination of our air, land and water.

Nevertheless, the notion of scarcity pervades our lives. Think about the conversations we have. How much time do you spend complaining about not having enough? Enough money, enough savings, enough space in your house, or enough time with your family and friends?

Consider the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-20).

A farmer goes out to plant his seed. Some of it falls along the path, some of it on rocky soil, some among thorns and the rest on good soil. The first three crops fail, but the fourth prospers. When asked to explain the parable, Jesus said that the seeds the farmer was sowing are like the word, the gospel, the good news. For the first group, represented by the seed along the path, the word never has a chance to flourish. Birds eat it up before it takes root. For the second group, the seed on rocky soil, people hear the word and receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes, they quickly fall away.

Most applicable to our context, however, is the third group, the seed that falls among thorns. Jesus describes how these people hear the good news and receive it. But “the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful” (v. 19 NIV).

Did you read that list? Are you troubled by the “worries of this life” or the “deceitfulness of wealth?” And where do the “desires for other things” come from?

Most of today’s media—television, radio, newspapers, websites and other “free” sources of information—would not exist if they were unable to stir up our desire for other things. Selling advertising is how the media pay their bills. Advertisers purchase our attention in order to sell their goods and services. Increasing sales leads to economic growth and higher incomes. And to the extent that income is good, so is economic growth.

But we all need more than income to survive. We also need love, leisure, companionship, responsibility, satisfaction, achievement, fun, the joy of children’s laughter, the warm glow of giving and a feeling of belonging. Most importantly, we need relationships to those around us and to God, the creator, redeemer and sustainer of us all.

Seeking God's Kingdom.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus urged his disciples to strive first for the Kingdom of God. Our consumer-driven culture, in contrast, begs us to strive for material things. In Jesus' day people worried about having enough food, drink and clothing to survive. Today people worry about having what it takes to compete—comfortable cars, smart phones and impressive houses. An ever-growing, heavily marketed collection of electronic devices, beauty aids and tasty treats tempt us daily, taunting us with the illusion that we can consume our way to happiness. And what about our children, who are enveloped in a high-tech, high-stakes world of grades, games and activities that will, it is hoped, prepare them for college?

For many of us, keeping up with the neighbors means more work, more debt and more stress, all in the name of making a living. It is true that income can buy us food, housing, clothes, transportation and other goods. But the acquisition of products like these does not bring fulfillment. As Christ proclaimed, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matthew 6:19)

Have material possessions become your treasures? What about accumulating "bucket list" travel experiences? Or posting photos to show your friends how happy you must be? If so, something may be wrong.

What to do?

See possessions as tools, not ends in themselves. First, let's consider Christ's advice to his early followers. Jesus acknowledges that our heavenly Father knows that we need food, drink and clothing. In today's world, many of us also need personal mobility, electronic communication and access to productivity-enhancing technology. But the mistake we too often make is pursuing these things as if they are ends in themselves. An alternative approach is to see things for what they really are: tools. Striving for God's kingdom may require some tools, to be sure. But the acquisition of tools is not the objective; the coming of the kingdom is.

Once we consider the goods and services we consume in their proper context, transformation can happen. The tools of modern living must be put into people's hands to be most effective, and then many hands make light work. Distributing goods and services more equally is not only just; it is also necessary since it enables more of God's people to participate in the kingdom project.

Tools must also be benign, designed to create rather than destroy. This principle applies to the effect on the worker using the tool, as well as to the environment where the tool is applied. If we believe that the earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1), then our work must be aligned with the goal of supporting life on this planet and protecting all of God's creatures, human and otherwise.

Consider the costs of our daily activities. From an economic perspective, the problem with pollution is that we as consumers or producers do not pay for the messes we make. Our cars, for example, are designed to prevent the driver and any passengers inside from breathing the toxic fumes released when gasoline burns. The exhaust pipe is placed in the rear of the vehicle, as far back as it can go. As we move from place to place, we literally drive away from the problem we create, leaving behind poisonous gasses and particulate matter that pollutes the air for everyone in our wake. But we don't even notice this. When we are sitting inside a vehicle, both our eyes and our passengers' eyes are focused on where we are going. If the exhaust from our engines were released into the air ahead of us rather than behind us, or if it entered the passenger compartment itself, we would feel differently about burning gasoline to get to work, to the store, to church and home again.

The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel once asked:

“Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture?
Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with
your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear
water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?
(Ezekiel 34:18 NIV)

The authors of a groundbreaking book on sustainability put it this way: “Markets make a good servant but a bad master and a worse religion.”⁵⁷ It is true that markets, or the market economy, can be of tremendous service when it comes to producing goods and services that people need. Markets can do this even better, however, when consumers and producers pay the full costs of their actions. Polluting the air, water and soil upon which human life depends should not be “free.” Ideally, enlightened public policies would be put into place to internalize these external costs, fixing what economists refer to as a market failure. Until that happens, people of conscience are called to consider the full impacts of their activities when going about their daily routines.

In the end, each of us needs to answer this question: Whom will we serve? Will it be God or wealth? As Christ said, it cannot be both. We as Christians are called to manage the money, land, time, energy and others that we have been given in ways that honor God, demonstrate our love for neighbor and protect the world God has created.

For Discussion

Key Ideas

1. **How has your understanding of Christian theology shaped** your management of resources? Are there particular texts, teachings or mentors that have had an impact on you? Share a story that might benefit others.
2. **Review the bulleted lists under Fast Forward to Today.** What do you have too little of and what do you have too much of? Are there areas of your life where the assumption that there is not enough of something governs your life? What else in these bulleted lists disturbs you?
3. **Think about your recent purchases.** Include several big-ticket items such as vehicles, appliances or electronics, as well as smaller things. Would you consider these things to be tools that enable you to participate in the work of advancing God’s kingdom? Or are they something else?
- 4.

57 Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins and L. Hunter Lovins, *Natural Capitalism* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1999) 261.

5. **The exhaust system of a car enables us to drive away from our pollution.** This is a good example of how we often externalize the costs of our behavior. What other examples of externalized costs can you think of? What public policies would you like to see put in place in order to help consumers and producers pay the full cost of their actions? How can we be responsible consumers if these policies don't yet exist?
6. **What aspects of our current society's consumption trouble you most?** Spend time imagining sustainable alternatives. Experiences in other cultures may help you brainstorm.

Digging Deeper

1. **What is the value of a regional economy?** Read Sarah van Gelder's article, "[31 ways to Jump Start the Local Economy](#)" or Wendell Berry's "[17 Rules for Sustainable Communities](#)," as a basis for this discussion. These are posted on the session 9 webpage.
2. **How can the corporate Church pursue a simple lifestyle?** If you were going to write a letter to a church institution giving it "permission" to do something at odds with society's economic expectations, what would you say?
3. **Unless we bury our money in the ground, it is never idle.** How might our values related to the environment influence:
 - the investments we make and
 - the organizations we support?
4. **Do you sometimes pay more for products** that are known to be better for the environment or the people that produce them—organic, fair trade, locally-grown? How do you justify the additional expense?

Local Ecosystem Focus

1. **Choose a retail business or industry** that is located within your local ecosystem. 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?

Suggested Spiritual Practices

1. **Claiming economic power:** When you wake up tomorrow morning, spend a few moments reflecting on the power you have as a North American consumer. The economic decisions you make today—what to buy, where to shop, how much to save and tithe—will impact your community and the planet we depend on. Think about how you might use your economic power whether it is large or small, to support the work of God’s people.
2. **Fast from one of your electronic pastimes** in order to reflect on Mark 4:19 (the seed among thorns) and Matthew 6:33 (seek first the Kingdom). What do these things mean for your life?
3. **Breathing our own wastes:** Reread the paragraph about vehicle exhaust in the middle of page 9-4. Then find an idling school bus, truck or car (your own?) and stand behind it for a few minutes. While you are there, pray for those most affected by air pollution. Ask for eyes to see other areas where the costs of your consumption are externalized.

Suggested Household Practices

4. **Tools for God’s kingdom:** Choose one item you own and find a way to transform it into a tool for God’s kingdom, as Richer suggests. Could sharing this resource build community? Can it help you to carry out your vocation? Does someone else need this tool more than you do?
5. **Voluntary gas tax:** The prices we pay for gasoline do not include all of the costs to the environment or the national security costs required to maintain access to fossil fuels. How would your behavior change if the price of gas were, say, \$10 per gallon as it is in some countries? For a week or a month, experiment with a “[voluntary gas tax](#),” setting aside the difference between \$2 per litre and the actual price of gas. Then give the money you raise to an organization or cause you care about. Note that you may find strength in numbers. Consider organizing a voluntary gas tax group.
6. **Tithing** is an ancient practice that reminds us of the importance of sharing our resources with the church to promote the common good. How much of your income before taxes did you donate to your church or other worthy organizations last year? What would you need to give up in order to increase your donations to ten percent of your before-tax income or some other percentage? Try giving this much next month to see how it changes your perspective.
7. **Investments:** Talk about “Digging Deeper” question 8 with your household. Here are places within the Mennonite fold where you can save money and serve others at the same time:
 - The [Mennonite Economic Development Association](#) (MEDA) creates business solutions to poverty by partnering with the poor to start or grow small and medium-sized businesses in developing regions around the world.
 - [Mennonite Foundation of Canada](#). Mennonite Foundation of Canada is the stewardship agency of Mennonite Church Canada, and can help with financial planning from a faith-based perspective.
 - The [Janzi Social Index](#) is a Canadian firm that measures the financial returns of 60 socially responsible investment (SRI) stocks. It is modeled after the Standard and Poor/Toronto Stock Exchange 60 (S&P/TSX 60).
 - [Meritas SRI Funds](#) manages socially responsible investments for individuals and institutions, selecting to invest in companies with practices that promote human dignity, community development, environmental stewardship and peace and justice.

Suggested Resources

[Center for the Advancement of the Steady State Economy.](#)

The mission of CASSE is to advance the steady state economy with stabilized population and consumption, as a policy goal with widespread public support and global membership. The organization lists three Canadian chapters.

[Ethical Markets.](#)

Economist Hazel Henderson, the author of *Ethical Markets: Growing the Green Economy*, founded this upbeat site. It calls for “the evolution of capitalism beyond current models based on materialism, maximizing self-interest and profit, competition and fear of scarcity.” It provides a wealth of economic news from a green perspective.

[Jubilee Economics: Sustainable Economics for One Earth, Not Five.](#)

Mexicans and North Americans collaborate on this vision of the biblical Jubilee and how to apply it to the present. They offer a [30-day Jubilee immersion](#) plan that introduces you to all of their resources.

[Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution.](#)

This site is related to the book of this title by Hawkins, Lovins and Lovins that is footnoted in the essay. The entire book can be downloaded here.

[Sabbath Economics Collaborative.](#)

This site bases its understanding of economics in the Sabbath. “At its root, Sabbath observance is about gift and limits: the grace of receiving that which the creator gives, and the responsibility not to take too much, nor to mistake the gift for a possession,” the authors say. See also a short book by Ched Myers, [The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics](#).

[The Story of Solutions.](#)

This nine-minute cartoon video from Annie Leonard’s “Story of Stuff” Project imagines how we might move our economy in a different direction, just by orienting ourselves toward new goals such as better health and a healthier environment.



Session 10:

Simple Abundance

Scripture: Psalm 23

Related Texts: Matthew 5:1-11, 6:9-13, 25:31-46, Isaiah 55:1-2

Through an Ecological Lens:

Try questions A and D with Psalm 23.

Look to our spiritual core.

Claiming Christianity as home base is a bit like living on top of an archeological tell.⁵⁸ A tell is a hill created when many generations of people build and rebuild on the same site. If you dig into a tell, you pass through many layers and can see what people from previous centuries have left behind. Our perch atop the tell of Christian history provides us with a spiritual core that can help us sort through the jumble of lifestyle advice available today. While that core includes considerable diversity, it is grounded in a vision of simple abundance and a respect for the humble tasks of everyday living.

A healthy household is undergirded by a vision of abundant life.

A number of passages could serve as a starting point as we consider what a sane household might look like in the 21st century. The

58 I was tempted to use the more familiar word, *landfill*, except that it implies trash, not treasure.

*Living*⁵⁹ propose Isaiah 40 to 66 as the Bible’s most compelling vision of joy-filled living. Jesus’ unconventional description of happiness from the Beatitudes offers another source of wisdom. The simplicity of the Lord’s Prayer, with its humble request for daily bread, could also anchor a lifetime. Here, we will focus on Psalm 23.

Psalm 23 should not be confined to deathbeds and funerals; it is meant to guide the living. This Psalm is the very picture of *shalom*—the Bible’s word for peace, health and contentment. What do we really need to be happy? We need clean water and wholesome food. We need a healthy relationship with the rest of creation. We need safe paths and the presence of God. Everything else is trivia. If the entire planet pursued Psalm 23’s vision of the good life, our current environmental problems would be more manageable if they existed at all.

“Much of the harm we bring to others, as well as ourselves, stems from costly fantasies about what constitutes real joy,” Paul Wadell says in his book, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*.⁶⁰ One could also say that behavior that is environmentally unsustainable is often socially and personally harmful as well. A long car commute to work is one example; overeating is another. Sustainable living is not so much a burdensome limitation of our freedom as an opportunity to redirect our lives toward God’s purposes and our own best interests. If we do so, we may discover that living within the constraints of the created order is a matter for celebration rather than complaint.⁶¹

The biblical vision of the good life is neither lavish nor austere. Rather, it is a mindset that sees abundance in the essential and the everyday: in a pool of water that has not dried up; in a pasture that is not overgrazed; in companionship during suffering. Self-sacrifice is not the goal of the Christian life, but it *is* a valuable practice because it trains us to recognize abundance. If you’ve spent a day fasting, a banana takes on the glamour of a hot fudge sundae.

59 Nick Spencer, R. S. White, and Virginia Vrobesky, *Christianity, Climate Change, and Sustainable Living* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009).

60 Paul J. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008) 2.

61 Nick Spencer, R. S. White, and Virginia Vrobesky, *Christianity, Climate Change, and Sustainable Living* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009) 63.

If you've biked or walked everywhere for six months, a car ride can be experienced as the luxury it really is. A recent psychological study supports these examples. The authors found that wealth blunted people's ability to savor life's goodness. Their research suggested that when resources are scarce, people spend more time appreciating what they do have.⁶²

A healthy household requires a householder.

This would be stating the obvious in most cultures, but in North America, many of us have abdicated our position as household managers. We have allowed a scattered scrambling from fast food outlet to soccer practice to replace loving attention to the functioning of our homes. Manual labor and housework do not have the status they once did. Whatever one does at a computer is now considered much more important work than repairing a toaster or doing the laundry. While scanning descriptions of home economics programs offered by the few colleges that have not already dropped this major, I noticed that several were quick to assure the reader that this field was no longer about practical skills like baking brownies or darning socks. We can do without brownies, but people who have neither time nor practical skills to give to householding may as well not read sustainable living tip sheets.

Isn't *householder* a lovely word? It conjures up images of someone with their arms wrapped around the whole home: holding it together in an orderly fashion, holding it in prayer, holding sick children, cleaning the gutters and picking tomatoes. I was so taken with the word that I looked it up in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The first definition was as expected, but the second definition was . . . *God*. I can't recall our congregation ever praying to God the Great Householder, but apparently it was a common practice over the past millennium. John Calvin, for example, writing in the mid-1500s, describes God as "A most loving and carefull housholder,

62 Jordi Quoidbach, et. al. "Money Giveth, Money Taketh Away: The Dual Effect of Wealth on Happiness." *Association for Psychological Science*, XXX, 1-5, 2010.

because he alwayes sent them rayne to prepare them foode.”⁶³ The metaphor aptly captures God’s sustaining presence, overseeing both the human family and creation.

Indeed, God as household manager is a common biblical image if we look for it. Both the tending of animals and the tending of a guest at the table in Psalm 23 are forms of house- holding. God is the provider of food and drink throughout the Hebrew Bible, for the hungry slaves escaped from Egypt as well as the wild donkeys in Psalm 104. Margaret Kim Peterson in her book, *Keeping House*, pursues this theme in the New Testament:

[H]ouse keeping can play a part in the ancient Christian discipline of the imitation of Christ. In his earthly life, Jesus humbly embraced both life in the body and life in community. He allowed others to feed and shelter him and in turn concerned himself with the feeding and clothing and sheltering of others.⁶⁴

Peterson also has an interesting take on Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25 about sorting the sheep and the goats at the last judgment:

There is a tendency on the part of those of us who are well fed, clothed and housed to imagine that the needy people to whom Jesus refers in Matthew 25 are people we don’t know—the sort of people who are served at homeless shelters... But housework is all about feeding and clothing and sheltering people who, in the absence of that daily work, would otherwise be hungry and ill-clad and ill-housed.⁶⁵

Reclaiming housework as God-like and God-blessed work is a necessary prerequisite to retrofitting our homes and refining our diets.

Another defense of the art of householding comes from the theologian Malinda Berry. Berry reads the Mennonite cookbook classic, *More with Less*, (1976) and its later companion volume, *Living More with Less*, as works of organic theology similar to Latin American

63 Jean Calvin, *The Psalms of David and others*; with M. John Calvin’s commentaries (transl. Arthur Golding), 1st edition, 1571 (1 vol.) London: T. East and H. Middleton. Cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

64 Margaret Kim Peterson, *Keeping House: The Litany of Everyday Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

65 Peterson 3.

liberation theology.⁶⁶ She describes their author, Doris Janzen Longacre, as a theologian as well as a home economist. Longacre's second book includes many lifestyle stories organized around five household standards for daily living: do justice, learn from the world community, nurture people, cherish the created order and non-conform freely. Longacre mentored her community in the art of translating theological norms into concrete action and building bridges between the kitchen and the global community beyond it.⁶⁷ More broadly speaking, this is what good householders do.

Economic, racial and cultural diversity enriches our communal vision of a healthy household.

Long before diversity was cool and trendy, the Christian tradition has been calling its members to envision rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, Ethiopian eunuch and Philippian businesswoman gathered around a common core despite their differences. The long view from the top of the archeological tell reminds us of the vast assortment of households from other times and places that have attempted to live out a Gospel of simple abundance. This diversity can be enriching. It also requires us to discern carefully rather than borrow others' solutions without reflecting on them.

How to manage a household has always been high on the list of interests for people of faith. However, they have not always used the same language to talk about it, nor had identical goals. Consider these three terms from different time periods: *simple lifestyle*, *sustainable lifestyle*, *poverty*. *Simple lifestyle* is the term Mennonites (and many other people) have used over the past forty years or so to denote a life rooted in spiritual values and uncluttered by luxury, showiness or trivia. Living a *sustainable lifestyle* is a more recent concern and has a technical definition. *Sustainability* is a term borrowed from the fields of business and environmental science. It is focused on our biological systems' ability to provide for the

66 Malinda Elizabeth Berry, "The Gifts of an Extended Theological Table: World Community Cookbooks as Organic Theology," in Alain Epp Weaver and Robert Kreider, [*A Table of Sharing: Mennonite Central Committee and the Expanding Networks of Mennonite Identity*](#) (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing, 2011) 288.

67 *ibid*, 293.

present without diminishing the possibilities for future generations, ecologically, socially or financially.

Centuries earlier, *poverty*, as in “poverty, chastity and obedience” was the language in which Christians addressed lifestyle issues. The Rule of St. Benedict, which has governed many monasteries for over 1500 years, understands poverty as a tool that enables people to listen to God. In giving up the right to private property, monks and nuns learned to depend on God and their communities. Free from both material clutter and anxieties about basic needs, the monastic household could focus on listening to God’s voice.⁶⁸ One can imagine a lively dialog between three households, each with practices based on slightly different language.

Diversity becomes a problem when simple living “solutions” appropriate to one era, social class or culture become frozen in time or applied in other contexts where they don’t make sense. At its best, Mennonite plain clothing was (and is) an attempt to live simply and free from the dictates of fashion. This interpretation of Christ’s teachings has also descended into legalism and silliness when Christian evangelists made it into law and exported it to times and places where it wasn’t authentic or even understood.

Environmental evangelists are capable of similar blunders. Excellent advice for people with power and wealth may make no sense to people from another economic location. Barbara Kingsolver’s novel, *Flight Behavior*, describes an encounter between a tract-wielding environmentalist and a low-income mother from the Appalachian Mountains. Together, they examine the man’s list of lifestyle suggestions.

“Reduce the amount of meat in your diet,” he says.

“I’m trying to increase the amount of meat in my kids’ diet. Box macaroni and cheese only goes so far,” she says.

“Avoid flying,” he says.

68 Daniel J. Ward, O.S.B. *“Poverty: A Way of Listening.”* *Monastics: Life and Law: Reflections of a Benedictine Canonist.* American Benedictine Academy, 1998.

“I’ve never flown in my life,” she says.

“Take your own carry-out container to restaurants.”

“I haven’t been to a restaurant in two years.”

Obviously, this man’s brochure was not pitched to a family living in poverty.

The different approaches that congregations take to buildings highlight the importance of our racial and cultural contexts. Several congregations in Canada do not own a building and see this as good economic and environmental stewardship. Hope Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Man. rents space from a United Church; Pinawa Christian Fellowship meets in a school in Pinawa, Man.; and The Gathering Church in Kitchener, Ont. also meets in a school building. The U.S. offers some good examples too: First Mennonite Church of San Francisco rents from a Jewish synagogue; and Pilgrims Mennonite in Akron, Pa., makes use of Mennonite Central Committee buildings.

I recall meeting an African American pastor with an entirely different perspective. Without a building, an African American congregation wasn’t a congregation, he said, and explained the history behind his statement. Often, a church building was the first property that former slaves were able to own. Such a building was a symbol of achievement and dignity. Congregants took pride in pooling their resources to purchase a building; they would feel homeless without one, he asserted.

We are all held within the embrace of God the great householder who wills abundant life for us. We are all called to craft Christ-centered households. No one is excused from thinking through the environmental challenges that face our planet, but neither will we all come to the same conclusions. Let us be willing to challenge each other without making judgments. Let us be a thoughtful and articulate people, able to explain our choices. Let us delight in the diversity of expressions that result.

For Discussion

Key Ideas

1. **What is your history with a faith-based emphasis on a simple lifestyle?** Have you experienced it as good news, or as something else? What successes and failures have you and your household had in attempting to live sustainably?
2. **What do you most want out of life?** Where do Psalm 23 and the main points of the essay intersect with your hopes?
3. **Can you think of an action your household could take** for the sake of creation that would be a source of greater wellbeing rather than a sacrifice? What might that be?
4. **Do you consider yourself a “householder?”** Does your household have adequate time and attention to address sustainable living concerns such as food, water and energy consumption? If so, are there other barriers that prevent you from making environmentally friendly changes that you would like to make? Help each other identify ways to overcome these barriers.
5. **What encounters have you had with people from other races, classes or cultures** whose understanding of the good life was different than yours? How might ideas from diverse backgrounds enrich your understanding?

Digging Deeper

1. **Imagine three households.** One practices *simplicity*, another practices *sustainability*, and the third practices *poverty*. What differences do you picture between their lifestyles? Does one appeal to you more than the others?
2. **What do you make of the fact that the 23rd Psalm portrays God as a “farmer?”** What kind of relationship between land, animals and people is described?
3. **Historically, Mennonites have been a farming people,** sought after for their ability to bring forth food from marginal land. What does this heritage add to the discussion surrounding food? Does your household produce food or other goods as well as consume them?

Local Ecosystem focus

1. **Where does your drinking water come from?** Where does your wastewater go and how is it treated?
2. **Are there contaminants in your water?**
3. **Where does food come from in your community?** What foods are grown within your circles? Do they feed the local population or go elsewhere?
4. **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?

Suggested Spiritual Practices

(Choose one to work on this week.)

1. **Seek abundance:** Find a way to fast this week from your usual level of consumption. This could include skipping a meal, giving up meat, making your Sabbath a carbon-free day, biking whenever possible or not entering a store. What simple pleasures did you discover instead?
2. **Pay attention to water:** Give thanks for each cup of water you drink this week. Pray for those whose rivers are dried up, whose aquifers are depleted, who have no well.
3. **Begin a gratitude journal:** Each day, write about the things you are thankful for. You may find you have a lot to say, even on bad days.
4. **Bible study:** Apply the Ecological Lens Questions to Psalm 23 or the related scriptures listed.

Suggested Household Practices

(Choose one to work on this week.)

1. **Discuss your food choices** with your household using the [Food Resource Sheet](#) provided for this session. In what way is God calling you to practice your faith at the table?
2. **Calculate your carbon footprint.** If you did not already do this during Session 6, try it now. Flip to the [Carbon Footprints](#) section of the Focus Materials. How much would it cost to offset your emissions by donating to an organization that promotes renewable power or plants trees? Try offsetting all or part of your emissions this year.
3. **Become aware of what you consume:** For one week, keep a list of everything that you purchase. How did each item enrich your life? Put a star by items that do not fit your values. How might you better align your consumption with your understanding of the good life?

Suggested Resources

Lifestyle Broadly Speaking

[The World Wildlife Foundation's 2014 Living Planet Report.](#)

The report, available for download, states that Canadians “are using approximately 3.7 times their share of the Earth’s annual productivity.” The website summarizes their key findings.

[Simple Carbon Foot print calculator.](#)

What’s your carbon footprint? The Global Footprint Network offers a calculator with various options to help children or adults analyze their approximate ecological footprint, based on whether they live in Eastern Canada (Ontario) or Western Canada (Calgary).

[Detailed Carbon Footprint Calculator](#)

This tool is available to assess carbon footprint based on home, travel and lifestyle options including diet.

Blessed Earth Tip Sheets.

Blessed Earth is an educational non-profit that inspires and equips people of faith to become better stewards of the earth. Matthew and Nancy Sleeth are the founders. Their concise and attractive tip sheets cover food, water, green cleaning, lawns and gardens, vacations and more.

Hayes, Shannon. *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture*. Richmondville, NY: Left to Write Press, 2010.

This book is about homemaking as a positive choice centered on family and community. Hayes, who writes from a sustainable farm in New York, emphasizes that households can produce goods as well as consume them.

Longenecker, Doris Janzen with Valerie Weaver, ed. *Living More with Less, 30th Anniversary Edition*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010.

This revision of a Mennonite classic advocates for a five-part “household code”: do justice, learn from the world community, nurture people, cherish the natural order, nonconform freely. Chapters on clothing, gardening, food, homes, transportation, and so on, share practical tips and stories. A free [Living More with Less Study Guide](#) is available from MennoMedia.

Peterson, Margaret Kim. *Keeping House: The Litany of Everyday Life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

Valuing housework as important work is a necessary prerequisite to living sustainably. “What’s Christian about housework?” Peterson asks and finds some profound answers.

Spencer, Nick, R. S. White, and Virginia Vroblesky. *Christianity, Climate Change, and Sustainable Living*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009.

The authors present a strong biblical case and an engaging, hopeful approach to sustainable living. This book emphasizes the local causes of climate change and the lifestyle changes that can reduce our impacts.

[Top 10 ways you can stop climate change.](#)

The David Suzuki Foundation says individuals can impact climate change through the choices they make.

Food

Significant leaders in the movement toward sustainable food and farming include Will Allen, Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, Joel Salatin, Frances Moore Lappé and Anna Lappé.

Theologians or biblical scholars who are known for their work on food include Andy Alexis-Baker, Wendell Berry, Shannon Jung, Angel Mendez-Montoya, Norman Wirzba.

The Internet contains a vast sea of resources on sustainable farming and eating. The sources below are ones that have Mennonite ties.

Kaufman, Roy. [*Healing God's Earth: Rural Community in the Context of Urban Civilization.*](#)

Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013.

While not specifically about farming, this book grows out of Kaufman's long career as a pastor in rural communities. It is a biblical and theological look at what it means to be a community in the face of a corrosive dominant culture.

Schrock, Jennifer Halteman. [*Just Eating? Practicing Our Faith at the Table Participants Book.*](#) Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Hunger Program, 2004.

This curriculum brings together hunger, health, the environment and the communal and sacred aspects of food, all in one seven-week study. A middle school version is also available. Download online for free or order an inexpensive print copy.

Metzger, Willard. [*Thanking God with Integrity.*](#) World Vision, 2010, 2013.

This three-volume series of books shares table graces that focus offering gratitude for what we have while remembering a world that suffers hunger, poverty, and need.

[Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College](#)

This 1,189-acre nature preserve's vision of environmental education

includes the [Merry Lea Sustainable Farm](#) and the [Merry Lea Agroecology Summer Intensive](#) where undergraduates come to learn to farm in harmony with the surrounding ecosystems. This is where much of the *Every Creature Singing* curriculum was written. Come visit us! See our farm and browse our ten fat shelves of books on everything from genetic engineering to building chicken coops.

[Calendar of Environmental Events](#)

A yearly calendar of events taking place across Canada is available from [Friendly Planet](#). The events must be submitted to appear on the calendar. Although it may not be all-inclusive, it does offer a variety of listings across the country.

[Food Secure Canada.](#)

Zero hunger, healthy and safe food, and sustainable food systems are the objective of this website as it strives to feed the Canadian population through an alliance of organizations and individuals.

Lind, Mary Beth and Cathleen Hockman-Wert. [Simply in Season](#). Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005.

This cookbook arranges recipes according to when local food is available in season. A [Simply In Season Children's Cookbook](#) and a [Simply in Season Leader's Study Guide](#) are also available.

York, Tripp and Andy Alexis-Baker. [A Faith Embracing All Creatures: Addressing Commonly Asked Questions About Christian Care for Animals](#). Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012.

This collection of essays looks at our relationship with animals and challenges our comfortable assumptions about eating meat.

Fossil Fuels

Ball, Jeffrey. "[Six Products, Six Carbon Footprints.](#)" The Wall Street Journal, 10/6, 2008.

Consumer goods have carbon footprints too. Interestingly, the largest part of the carbon footprint of many products does not come from manufacturing or shipping, but is generated during consumer use.

[Citizens for Public Justice.](#)

This organization "seeks human flourishing and the integrity of creation as our faithful response to God's call for love and justice" and offers a number of resources for faith-based pursuit of justice, including ecological justice.

Water

[Grace Communications Foundation](#)

The Grace Communications Foundation looks at the ways water, food and energy are interrelated. Learn about water footprints on their water page.

[Water Footprint Network](#)

The Water Footprint Network works with governments, businesses and individuals globally to seek ways to provide sustainable use of fresh water supplies. It offers significant information on water conservation and a choice of two water footprint calculators for individuals, one [simple](#) and the other [more complex](#).

[Home Water Works](#)

Home Water Works helps you calculate how much water you use and how you could save.



Session 11:

Creating Accountable Communities

Scripture: Acts 2, especially verses 1-11 and 41-47

Related Texts: Acts 4:32-37, Matthew 25:31-46

Through an Ecological Lens:

Try questions B and E with Acts 2:41-47.

Sustainability is a community endeavour.

The autumn of 2012, Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College embarked on its first [Sustainability Leadership Semester](#). Undergraduates came to live at this 1200-acre nature center in Wolf Lake, Ind., in order to study together and explore sustainable lifestyles. In addition to coursework, they prepared their own meals using food from the Merry Lea Farm and tried out sustainable practices related to food, water, energy and shelter. By the end of the semester, an interesting shift had taken place. While students had arrived expecting to learn ways they as *individuals* could live more sustainable lives, they left convinced that sustainable living was a *communal endeavour*. This shift in thinking is one that congregations may need to work at as well.

Churchgoers ought to be old hands at communal endeavours. Christian churches are unique communities bound together in love and empowered by the Holy Spirit. As William Willimon has put it in his commentary on the book of Acts:

“The most eloquent testimony to the reality of the resurrection is not an empty tomb or a well-orchestrated pageant on Easter Sunday, but rather a group of people whose life together is so radically different, so completely changed from the way the world builds a community, that there can be no explanation other than that something decisive has happened in history.”⁶⁹

Sadly, not all of us are as steeped in the reality of the resurrection as we wish. Neither are our one-hour-a-week communities as intimate and vibrant as we might desire.

Many congregations are not supportive places for lifestyle transformation. Questions of consumption simply don't come up in church or are avoided for the sake of unity. I recall meeting a man who was trying to decide if his family needed to buy a van. He found that fellow church members were reluctant to discuss this major purchase with him. They regarded vehicles as a personal matter and were not comfortable giving counsel on a lifestyle issue.

If we grasp the Christian story, however, following Jesus is *all about* figuring out how to live together so that everyone has what they need without exploiting others. Let's consider what our central ritual—sharing communion—might have to say to us about creating communities of accountability.

Spirited Tables.

It seems a tame enough ritual. We recite a few words, say a prayer, take a bite of bread and sip on grape juice in the safe confines of our church sanctuaries, usually with people a lot like us. But if we really understood what we were commemorating when we accept this token meal, our governments would be bugging our worship

69 William Willimon, Acts, in the series, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988) 51.

services. Taking communion is a subversive, Spirit-inspired act of defiance against the dominant world order and its economic structures. It announces that radical sharing across lines of race, class and gender are possible and that when we do that, Jesus Christ is present among us in a powerful way.

Most Christians would trace the origins of our communion ritual to Jesus' request that his followers "do this in remembrance of me" at the last supper.⁷⁰ Why was that memory important to early believers? Surely it was reinforced by the early Church's experiences of worship and table fellowship following Pentecost. These too are "communion stories." Given the wind and the flame, it is easy to imagine that Pentecost was an inner mystical experience. It may have been that, but the story also describes Pentecost as an outpouring that enabled radical new ways of sharing resources. Just after Peter's impassioned altar call concludes in Acts 2:41, we hear about sharing, communal meals and redistribution of wealth. On either side of the clause, "bore witness to the resurrection" in 4:33, we find that believers are relinquishing possessions so that no one is in need.⁷¹

In biblical times, 90% of people lived at a subsistence level. While Acts does mention sales of land, food was the resource that most people might have been able to share. Thus, it makes sense that sharing the common life, breaking bread and prayer are all mentioned together in 2:42. The Lord's Supper that the early church observed was a full meal, not a token bite of bread. It was a way of feeding everyone physically as well as spiritually.

70 To reflect more deeply on what Jesus might have meant us to remember when we break bread together, see *The Meals of Jesus: Table Fellowship in the Gospels*, by Mark Moore. He provides a list of table fellowship incidents in the Gospels and a helpful one-page commentary.

71 Biblical interpreters have often dismissed the communal life described in Acts as temporary, idealistic and romanticized. For an alternate interpretation, see Reta Finger's *Of Widows and Meals*, listed under resources below. According to Finger, the sharing practices described in the early chapters of Acts were widespread, long-lived and continue to be relevant today.

The early church remembered Jesus by pooling my lentils and your sheep bone; her loaf of bread and his olive oil. According to Acts, this is what happens when the Holy Spirit blows: people who don't speak the same language manage to understand each other, and everyone has enough to eat. This is the vision we commemorate every time we take communion.

How might we reclaim our birthright as people of wind, flame and justice? How can we include birds, insects, trees and land in our tally of who needs food and drink? Below, we'll look at more recent ways people have formed communities in order to honor the needs of all people and the earth. The first two are Christian; the last two speak in secular language and offer interesting possibilities for cross-fertilization. If we hope to share good news or collaborate with neighbors beyond the walls of our congregations, we may need to be bilingual.

New Monasticism is a movement of intentional communities within Protestantism that began in the early 2000s. Like traditional monks and nuns, these laypeople nurture a common life together. They commit to spiritual disciplines, live among the poor, practice hospitality to the stranger, care for the creation around them and share economic resources. In 2004, a number of intentional communities gathered and agreed on the [12 marks of new monasticism](#). This list now defines the movement much as the Rule of St. Benedict does for Benedictine monasteries.

Shane Claiborne of the [Simple Way Community](#) in Philadelphia, Pa., is the new monastic spokesperson most familiar to many of us. [The Jeremiah Community](#) in Toronto is another group. Their website points out that our era has much in common with the third and fourth centuries. This is the time when the earliest monks and nuns fled to the desert to avoid the syncretism of the organized religion of their day.

We may not be free to pick up and relocate to one of these inspiring communities, but most of the practices that make them who they are can happen anywhere. A small group within a more traditional congregation might covenant to embrace elements of the 12 marks. The more specific [Rule of Life](#) described on The

Jeremiah Community’s website is another possible guideline, or a group could write its own rule.

The Sevenfold Covenant model was developed by Ched Myers of [Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries](#), Oak View, CA, in the mid-2000s to help people connect their faith with personal and political issues of economic justice. The covenant includes seven areas:

- surplus capital
- debt
- giving
- environment and green living
- consumption
- solidarity
- work and Sabbath

Group participants agree to work on one thing in each of the seven categories in an honest and transparent way. Each household begins wherever it is, without judgment and takes steps that may be small or large. Myers reports that most participants “experienced palpable relief in breaking the social taboos that keep us silent about money, class and lifestyle.” They became less anxious about their stuck places and more able to imagine practical alternatives. One tangible outcome from the 45 households that piloted the covenant involved savings. Collectively, they moved 2.75 million dollars into socially responsible investing.⁷² Matthew Colwell’s *Sabbath Economics: Household Practices*, tells stories about people working through the Sevenfold Covenant and provides discussion questions. Again, this model of community could work anywhere, with anyone willing to submit to the process. [Experimenting with a Household Sabbath Economics Covenant](#) offers further exploration of the process.

72 Matthew Colwell, *Sabbath Economics: Household Practices* (Washington, DC: Church of the Saviour, 2009) 13-14.

[The Transition Network](#) is a network of communities working to:

- build resilience in response to peak oil,
- reduce carbon emissions in response to climate change, and
- strengthen local economies.

The movement began in Ireland in 2006 when a town adopted an energy descent plan. Transition town planners assume that life with a reduced supply of fossil fuels is inevitable and so is climate change. Rather than waiting for the government to act, these communities are organizing for change on their own from the bottom up. They believe that by planning for this future at the local level, we can both weather the coming crises and build a more fulfilling, connected and less harried way of life.

Each transition town is unique to its locale. The transition movement in Goshen, Indiana, for example, is involved with food issues. It owns a community cider press and sponsored apple gleanings in the fall of 2013, when many suburbanites with apple trees had bumper crops they couldn't use. It also helps different groups to network together. Transition towns in other communities have developed local currencies or sponsored "re-skilling" workshops for people who no longer know how to cook, build or grow things.

The practical, down-to-earth concerns of the transition town movement can engage a wide variety of people. This movement could provide a much-needed model of community engagement for churches that have stayed focused within their four walls. Alternately, Mennonites have much to offer the transition movement, as many of them still *do* know how to cook, build and grow things. We can draw on a rich communal heritage that secular people may lack.

To find Canadian transition initiatives, see the Transition Network's zoomable [world map](#).

Addiction work and 12-step groups applies to a lot more of us than we care to admit. If you consume a substance or pursue a habit against your self-interest and you can't stop, you are an addict. That is a standard definition from the field of addictions. Most of us think of drugs and alcohol or possibly gambling or pornography when we think of addictions. Nevertheless, our society's use of fossil fuels and its other consumptive habits might fall in that category as well.

Do insights from chemical addictions transfer to our compulsion to use more than our fair share of resources? Can we wean ourselves from a high carbon lifestyle through an addictions group in the same way that a compulsive eater might benefit from Overeaters Anonymous? Some people are beginning to think so. An emerging field called neuroconservation attempts to apply brain research in areas like addiction to our need to address climate change. For example, the ability to overcome an immediate impulse in exchange for a later, better reward is one feature being studied in relation to both addiction and sustainable lifestyles.⁷³

Addicts at the beginning of a 12-step program admit they are powerless over their addictions and throw themselves on the mercy of God or a Higher Power as they understand it. They then move toward recognizing the harm they have caused and making amends. Eventually, they commit to helping others with similar problems. If we applied theological language to the 12-step experience, we might use words like humility, sin, repentance, confession and grace.

A church seeking to address sustainable lifestyle issues could learn a lot from addiction recovery programs and the addicts in their midst. One part of the process that seems particularly compatible with overconsumption of fossil fuels is the "fearless moral inventory" that addicts must face, recognizing the ways their habits have caused harm. Secondly, community life would deepen and take on new meaning if we realized that we are powerless to change without the help of the body of Christ. Recovering addicts know that the community aspect of 12-step programs is essential. For new habits to stick even under stress and temptation, people need to be part of

73 Elizabeth Jeffries, "[Carbon Fix](#)," *Nature Climate Change*, 3, 765 (2013).

a supportive community that believes change is possible. Without the help of a group to reinforce belief, it is too easy to doubt and despair.⁷⁴ Recovering addicts sometimes say that their addiction groups are the most intimate and profound experiences of “church” that they have experienced. They could teach us the freedom to face our lifestyle failings and be honest about them. They could also show us the value of genuine community based on mutual support and mutual need.

Sustainability requires intimacy.

As I review the communal life described in Acts and in the contemporary models of community described above, the word *intimacy* comes to mind. Caring for our congregations, our neighbors and our watersheds may require more intimacy than many of us are used to. In the fall of 2013, I gleaned apples with local people I had never met before, thanks to our local transition town movement. Committing to other practices described above would require more intense connections than that. Is this a draw or a sacrifice for 21st century Americans, given our busy lifestyles? Even eating together on a regular basis would cramp many people’s styles. Perhaps it is as Jesus said: choosing his way requires letting some things go and leaving some people behind. There is a price to pay, but also much to gain.

74 Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. (New York, NY: Random House, 2012) 92.

For Discussion

Key ideas

1. **Is your congregation a supportive place** for lifestyle transformation? If so, what makes it that way? If not, how could you work toward simpler and more sustainable lifestyles together?
2. **The essay suggests that a transformed community life** requires the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit. What helps or hinders your connection with that power?
3. **The essay also suggests that intimacy with fellow congregants** is a necessary piece of a transformed community life. What helps or hinders your intimacy with your congregation?
4. **Which of the models of community mentioned in the essay are familiar to you?** What other groups within your region or your congregation call people to sustainable lifestyles or have the potential to do so?
5. **Where is the balance between honoring diversity and challenging each other** to consider how much is enough? How can the diversity within your congregation be an opportunity as well as a tension? What are healthy ways to discuss our different approaches to lifestyle issues?

Digging Deeper

1. **How would you help the man mentioned in [Session 11](#)** discern whether to buy a van if he were in your congregation?
2. **How can your congregation practice sharing of goods and services?** What do you have to share and how could you share these things?
3. **How can your congregation be part of ensuring that people** within your local ecosystems have clean water, clean air, healthy food systems and quality shelter? What about future people?
4. **In what ways does the “addiction” definition fit or not fit** for North American consumption of fossil fuels and other goods? In what ways does the 12-step “cure” fit?
5. **What structures can you build into your congregation** so that lifestyle issues remain in the foreground? For example:
 - Include a lifestyle challenge in a membership covenant.
 - Plan Christian education classes so that topics such as food, water, energy and various forms of creation care are addressed on a regular basis.
 - Hold a yearly retreat where members work on lifestyle issues.

Local Ecosystem Focus

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?

Suggested Spiritual Practices

1. **Invite input** from a few members of your congregation on a financial decision you might normally make on your own.
2. **Start a small group** that draws on one of the models of community described in the essay. Or challenge existing small groups within your congregation to wrestle with the issues touched on in sessions 9-12 of this curriculum.
3. **Agape meals:** Sharing food is a sacred act. Find new ways to eat together that include people who usually eat alone or people who have trouble keeping food on the table. Work through the online resource, [The Meals of Jesus: Table Fellowship in the Gospels](#), mentioned in footnote 2. How can an Agape meal help you to remember Jesus and celebrate the Holy Spirit present among you?
4. **“No needy among them”:** Discern non-human need in your community. What about birds that are losing their habitat? Roadsides infested with plastic trash? Polluted water? Pray for the need that God reveals to you, both personally and within your worship services. Seek guidance for action.

Suggested Household Practices

All of these practices refer to your congregational “household.”

1. **Score sheet work:** Mennonite Creation Care Network offers a Greener Congregation Score Sheet to help congregations get started. Questions range from buildings to congregational life to worship and encourage a systematic approach. Work through one or more questions on the score sheet.
2. **Set up a borrowing system** that allows people to indicate what items they are willing to share and under what circumstances. Categories could include tools, housewares, vehicles, labor, skills, childcare, items for worship visuals. You could also draft a covenant that people sign when they borrow something.
3. **Set up systems for recycling** or evaluate the ones you do have. Does everyone know about your paper bins? Is there a need to provide for waste that is difficult or inconvenient to recycle, such as batteries⁷⁵ and old electronics. Research how the items are recycled to make sure they are recycled safely. Announce your region’s monthly hazardous waste collection, or have one person drive a load to save everyone making a trip.
4. **Glean ideas from others:** Visit MCCN’s [congregations page](#) for stories about how other congregations are working together to care for creation.

75 Note that you will probably have to pay to get rid of alkaline batteries because it is not cost-effective to recycle them. [Call 2 Recycle](#) is one company that does this.

Suggested Resources

Heinrichs, Steve. [*Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice and Life Together*](#). Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 2013.

This challenging collection of essays reveals an emerging dialogue between Indigenous and settler voices. A [*Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry Study Guide*](#) is available as a free download.

Colwell, Matthew. *Sabbath Economics: Household Practices*. Washington, DC: Church of the Saviour, 2009. **and** Myers, Ched. *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*. Washington, DC: Church of the Saviour, 2001.

These are two companion books from [*Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries*](#). Myers lays the biblical and theological groundwork for an understanding of an economics grounded in the Sabbath and the Jubilee. Colwell tells stories about people working through the Sevenfold Covenant described in this session's essay. The book includes discussion questions.

Finger, Reta Halteman. [*Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts*](#). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.

Finger is skeptical of the long tradition that has dismissed the communal life described in Acts as temporary, idealistic and romanticized. She examines the sociological background of the time and describes how food and meals functioned in the Ancient Near East. According to Finger, the sharing practices described in the early chapters of Acts were widespread, long-lived and continue to be relevant today. See pp. 276-286 for a summary of the book.

Johnstone, Chris. [*“Insights from Addictions Recovery Applied to Climate Change.”*](#) Climate Code Red. N.p., January 29, 2012.

An addictions specialist makes connections between his work in health care and the dangers of climate change. He describes motivational interviewing. This is a technique where leaders help people hear themselves voicing their own concerns rather than dispensing advice.

[US and Canada Green City Index](#)

A research project sponsored by Siemens assess the environmental performance of 27 major cities in Canada and the US. Siemens is one of the world's largest producers of energy-efficient, resource-saving technologies.

[Mennonite Creation Care Network](#)

(MCCN). Congregations are MCCN's highest priority. Read stories about [congregations](#) caring for creation in various ways. Or download a Greener Congregations Score Sheet to help your congregation evaluate your creation care steps so far and set a direction for the future.

Moore, Mark. [The Meals of Jesus: Table Fellowship in the Gospels.](#)

This online chart catalogs the various forms of table fellowship described in the Gospels and what they might mean. Pastors, you've got a sermon series here.

[New Monasticism.](#)

Despite the decline of interest in organized religion among younger people, a web of intentional communities has attracted 20-somethings to follow Jesus by living in community among the poor. [The Jeremiah Community](#) and the rule of life they follow is one example.

[Transition Network.](#)

Learn about this shift toward local resources and less fossil fuels.

[The Twelve Steps for Freedom From Addictive Behaviors.](#)

Review the 12 steps and find many other resources related to addiction at this site.

Willimon, William. *Acts*, in the series, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988.

A trustworthy and readable commentary on the Acts texts used here.



Session 12:

A Spirituality That Sustains

Scripture: Revelation 5

Related Texts: Ephesians 3:14-21, I Corinthians 13:13

Through an Ecological Lens:

Try questions C and E with Revelation 5.

What sustains a passion for creation care beyond a three-month study? In this session, we use Revelation 5 to look at the way corporate worship undergirds our work on behalf of creation. In worship, we name our ultimate allegiance. In worship, we tell stories that challenge the violence and despair we encounter elsewhere. In worship, we remember who we are and how we are to live. In worship, an unlikely assortment of human beings becomes the body of Christ.⁷⁶ Worship that tells the truth about God's faithfulness to all of creation sustains our hope and empowers our actions. It is one of the unique gifts the Church has to offer its struggling planet.

The Source of Our Hope.

The *Every Creature Singing* curriculum was named for a vision. It is a vision that came to an exiled and persecuted early Christian named John, and it is the hope underlying all of our work these many weeks. Caught up in the Spirit, John witnesses what is ultimately real: a world where God is sovereign and the One worthy to take charge of all of history is revealed.

While Revelation appears to be about strange beasts and future predictions, it is really a book that highlights what is of ultimate worth. *Worthy* is an important word in Revelation 5. It occurs twice

⁷⁶ Summarized from John Roth, *Practices: Mennonite Worship and Witness*. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009). See especially pp. 61 to 78.

as the narrative describes the quest for someone worthy to open the scroll of history, and it is repeated twice in the songs of praise when the worthy one is found. Revelation is also about worship. In fact, the word, *worship*, comes from the Middle English word, *worth-ship*, which refers to putting a price on something. To *worship* is to ascribe worth to something.⁷⁷

After eleven weeks of scrupulous attention to our little local ecosystems, Revelation 5 comes at us like a punch in the gut. We've been seeking God *within* creation and our own neighborhoods these last three months, but here in Revelation, we meet God *beyond* creation: timeless, cosmic and universal. Using a throne to represent God's sovereignty, John confronts us with a Being out beyond watershed discipleship, the source, the center, the hope of the whole universe.

Nevertheless, the transcendent God in this vision is still intimately tied to the world of flesh. The One seated on the throne is surrounded by four living creatures, which are understood to be representatives of creation.⁷⁸ What is more, wrapped around that throne is a rainbow (4:3). This rainbow alludes to the only other rainbow in the Bible—the rainbow in Genesis 9. There, God makes a covenant with all living things and promises to bear with creation no matter what happens.

The Worthy One: Lamb and Root.

Revelation 5 provides us with vivid images for Christ as well. In verses 1–7, some *worthy* being is sought to open the scroll that describes God's purposes for the world. The *Lion* of Judah, The *Root* of David is announced as the deserving conqueror, but a lion never appears. In its place, John sees a slaughtered lamb. Note that the imagery used here to describe Christ is not human; it is animal and vegetable. We need metaphors from nature to help us understand the divine. For one thing, they remind us that God is an

77 Benjamin M. Stewart, *A Watered Garden: Christian Worship and Earth's Ecology*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2011) 9–10.

78 John R. Yeatts, *Revelation, Believer's Church Bible Commentary*. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003).

“Other;” a being outside of human categories like male and female. Furthermore, they lend dignity to the parts of creation that serve as windows to the divine. If a lamb can represent Christ, we might want to re-think how we treat sheep and other livestock. If a root tells us something about ultimate worth, we might approach plants with the sense of awe they deserve.

The lamb is the dominant image for Christ in the book of Revelation and appears 28 more times. Since the diminutive form of the Greek word is used, we could call it a “little lambkin.” Despite having been the victim of violence, this lamb has seven horns and seven eyes, denoting complete power and insight. In the interests of time, we will leave Christ the Lamb to the many able commentators who have already explored this image⁷⁹ and instead consider what Christ the Root has to offer us in an age of ecological despair.

Twice in Revelation—here and in the concluding finale in 22:16—Jesus is called the Root of David. Usually, we hear the Messianic mention of David (which doesn’t mean much to contemporary Gentiles) and never bother to explore this intriguing Christological metaphor involving roots. Given the rural context, it is not surprising that biblical writers used agricultural imagery. They often spoke of their nation as a plant, depicting goodness as that which is rooted and enduring. In Jeremiah 17:7-8, those who trust in God are said to be “like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.” Psalm 1 is similar.

A hopeful prophecy found in Isaiah 27:6 says,

In days to come, Jacob shall take root,
Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots,
and fill the whole world with fruit.

Isaiah 37:31 adds the delightful phrase, “take root downwards, and bear fruit upwards.” The words, *lion*, *lamb* and *root* in Revelation 5 likely allude to the “peaceable kingdom” vision in Isaiah 11, which also uses all three of these images. There, the Messiah is a new sprout on the old root. Let’s assume that Jesus was also imagining a

79 Ted Grimsrud, J. Nelson Kraybill, Barbara Rossing and John Yeatts are just a few of the authors that deal with the lamb in the book of Revelation.

well-rooted plant when he said, “I am the vine,” in John 15!

On the other hand, God’s judgment is sometimes described as an uprooting. “The wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it,” Proverbs 2:22 says.

I Kings 14:15 warns that God “will root up Israel out of this good land,” because of idolatry. Jesus’ parable about the sower follows suit with a description of seedlings growing in stony soil, soon to wither because they had only shallow roots.

For the hands-on folks among us who prefer outdoor learning to scripture citations, Jesus the root is an equally powerful image. Roots are a plant’s source of life. The dreary-looking lumps of vegetable matter that online nurseries mail you may look disappointing, but put the roots in the ground, and they are soon flourishing and green. It is useless to pull up crabgrass if you fail to extract the entire root; it will merely grow back. At Merry Lea, we burn parts of the landscape every year in order to maintain prairie habitat. Within a week, the charred ground is dotted with green and the prairie plants are back at it, drawing on their deep root systems, five, ten, twenty feet below ground.

A root is also an anchor. It keeps the plant in place no matter the weather. Even during a hurricane, relatively few trees are felled because their roots are made to withstand this stress. On the other hand, roots also anchor the soil. We live in a time when we have the sad opportunity to become experts on deforestation. Avalanches are the most obvious of the grim consequences of uprooted plants and soil erosion. The loss of roots also causes extinctions, disrupts the water cycle and drives climate change.

A root is in intimate contact with the local soil. When some hard-working researchers managed to pry the roots of a single ryegrass plant free from the soil it embraced, they measured 640 kilometers of roots tangled within just over half a cubic m of dirt.⁸⁰ This connection gives roots the magic capacity to draw nutrients from the surrounding soil and turn them into leaves, flowers and fruit.

Is not Christ also the indestructible source of life and anchor for

80 Stern 65.

the Church, embracing the earth and attuned to every source of nourishment in the soil? What a fitting metaphor for those engaged in watershed discipleship! Like the lamb that bears the marks of violence, Christ the Root suggests that God's way of conquering is humble. The way to life is through connection with the soil. It is about life preserved down in the dark places. Fire, drought, pesticides and hurricanes may come, but the root will always re-sprout.

Our Fellow Worshipers.

When the lamb makes its first appearance in Revelation 5, three groups of worshippers are there to celebrate its victory. First is the divine court, including the four living creatures. Next, billions of angels join them.⁸¹ A few verses later, John says,

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 . . . (5:13a)

Allow your imagination to play with this bold vision. What would it be like to *hear every creature singing*? While we could say that creation "sings" just by being itself, I like to imagine that a new capacity for song emerges at some point in the future, or that we develop ears that can hear the song. What would a mushroom sound like? Do they provide a grunty bass undertone, or are mushroom voices mellow and sweet? I think of the bird songs I know, and how pleasant it is to hear that their owners have returned in the spring, even if I can't see them. I think of the more skilled birders I know who can sort out vireo songs in the treetops, while I hear only the dissonant chatter of many birds. What if we all had ears like that only *better*?

The author of Revelation is not the only person to envision every creature singing. Lawrence Hart, a Mennonite pastor and Cheyenne peace chief, says that Native American people understand

81 The original text uses the largest numbers that the Greek language could express.

the earth as the Creator's song made visible.⁸² Anabaptist Bestiary, a contemporary music group under the direction of theologian Trevor Bechtel at Bluffton University, Bluffton, Ohio, endeavors to hear and share the voices of other creatures singing. The group writes and performs songs that speak in the voice of animals. While I was writing this curriculum, I listened almost daily to Anabaptist Bestiary's interpretation of what bees or sloths or beavers or other animals might say to us if they could speak.

The 20th century British author, C.S. Lewis, gives us a very vivid picture of creation as song in his Narnia novels for children. The Christ figure in the series is a great lion who calls Narnia into being by singing. "There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was, beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise . . . ever heard," Lewis writes. As the Narnian creation continues, the Creator's voice is joined by the "cold tingling, silvery voices" of stars. Later the creator's song changes and becomes more melodic and wilder. The earth responds and begins to swell and boil, and out of the humps and bumps come animals of every size and shape, embodying the song of their creator.⁸³

82 Chief Lawrence Hart, "The Earth is a Song Made Visible: A Cheyenne Christian Perspective." In *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice and Life Together*, Steve Heinrichs, ed. (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2013) 160-161.

83 C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*, (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1955) 93-106.

Joining the Song.

In Revelation, human beings are not caretakers of creation; here we are fellow worshippers and tardy ones at that. The vast, human choir does not come in until two chapters later in Revelation 7. We are neither the star singers nor the saviors; we are joining a song already in progress, called, “Worthy is the Lamb.”

In our weekly worship services, we too sing, “Worthy is the Lamb.” We ascribe worth to an itinerant healer and teacher who hiked a Palestinian backwater of the Roman Empire. We claim his sword-less mission, even though it ended badly. And every spring, as the trees are setting buds and the daffodils are piercing the dead leaves on their way toward the sun, we tell absurd stories about resurrection.

N.T. Wright, in his book *Surprised by Hope*, says we are all like stone masons, chiseling away at sculptures or towers or turrets that will only reveal their full beauty years in the future, when the cathedral is complete. In that grand building, no bit of goodness or justice or beauty will be left out or wasted.⁸⁴ Whether we are cleaning up rivers or teaching children to recycle; whether we are fighting ecological injustice or planting trees, whether we are researching threatened species or simply cherishing every sunset, let’s hope he’s right. And let’s keep singing while we work.

84 N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008) 209-210.

For Discussion

Key Ideas

1. **What sustains you?** What keeps you from lapsing into despair?
2. **How does change happen?** What turns fuzzy good intentions into clean water, fresh air and healthy land? Is it education? Legislation? Careful attention to habits? The vision provided by your congregation's worship? Or something else?
3. **Worshipping with creation:** How can your worship reflect God's blessing of all creation and creation's responsive praise? Discuss the worship ideas under Suggested Household Practices. Which suggestions would work in your context?
4. **Christ and creation:** At this point, how do you see non-human creation fitting into the good news of Jesus Christ? Has it changed since you last discussed this in session 2? What do images from Revelation add for you?

Digging Deeper

1. **God in your watershed versus God enthroned:** How do you balance the immanence and transcendence of God? Which one is dominant in your theology? How might strengthening your awareness of one or the other empower you to be a better protector of creation?
2. **Non-human metaphors for the Trinity:** Does your prayer life include nature images for God such as lamb, rock, wind, and mother bird? What about your corporate worship life? Which ones are meaningful to you? What might these add if you don't normally use them?
3. **Christ as animal:** Some of the meaning that a [slaughtered lamb](#) had for Jewish people is lost on us today. If you were going to describe Christ as an animal found in your region, what animal would you choose? Why? How might you work with this idea in your worship?
4. **Christ as root:** If you were going to imagine Christ as the root of a plant from your region, what plant would you choose? Why? Is there a way this plant can play a role in your worship?

Local Ecosystem Focus

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 local ecosystem?
2. **What does it mean to be rooted in this community?** What bonds people to this particular locale? How is a sense of place expressed? How

has this place shaped your relationship with God?

3. **What areas within your local ecosystem need a sustained commitment?** How might Christ the Root provide that?

Suggested Spiritual Practices

1. **Consider your habits.** What habits, spiritual or practical, sustain faithful earth keeping? What habits or practices threaten it?
2. **Review spiritual practices you tried.** Look at the [Overview of Spiritual Practices](#) and review the ones that you tried. Decide which practices you want to hold onto in the future. What do you need to do to make that happen?
3. **Listen for the sound of creatures singing.** Spend time outside noticing the songs of birds, frogs, insects, wind in trees or other sounds of creation. Offer your own prayers along with these sounds. Alternately, if there is a naturalist in your congregation and the season permits, have this person lead a listening hike. He or she can help you identify the voices of the birds, frogs and insects you may hear.
4. **Pray for your congregation's roots:** Note that Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-20 is suggested as an additional text. Here, Paul speaks of being rooted and grounded in love. Pray his prayer for your congregation.
5. **Paul also calls God "the Father from whom every family** in heaven and on earth takes its name." List some of the human surnames in your church directory. With the help of a field guide, list the family names of some species in your region. For example, daisies are in the Asteraceae family; sparrows are in the Passeridae family.
6. **Experiment with a spiral.** Joanna Macy is an eco-philosopher who has developed a program called [The Work that Reconnects](#). These exercises are interior work that focuses on moving people from despair to empowerment.
- **Macy's framework** is a spiral with four movements: gratitude, honoring our pain, seeing with new eyes and going forth. Macy describes the movement between these four stations as a spiral—not a circle—because they can be repeated many times with deepening levels of understanding. Gratitude develops a sense of wellbeing, trust and generosity. Working out of gratitude, we are then able to face the pain in the world around us instead of avoiding it or masking it. This immersion in pain further enables us to see a wider web of resources available to us. Our sense of community deepens and new possibilities for action emerge. A sense of interconnection with all people and all forms of life is a key part of the work.

- **The spiral** and many of the practices used in trainings are available on the web. Macy’s four movements resonate with themes in Christianity. She can help us see the Christian tradition’s emphases on gratitude, facing pain, the call to community and empowered outreach with fresh eyes.

Suggested Household Practices

The “household” these practices refer to is your congregation and the practices pertain to your corporate worship. This week, think about how your worship might open itself to creation’s presence, creation’s worship and creation’s needs.

1. **Acknowledge the land you worship on:** Cheyenne pastor Lawrence Hart says that in Cheyenne ceremonies, the priest begins by touching the earth four times. In other Native American traditions, a pipe is pointed in the seven directions. Find culturally appropriate ways to pay your respects to the land you worship on in your upcoming worship services.
2. **Add a Season of Creation** to your yearly worship cycle. See *The Season of Creation* resources below.
3. **Intercessory prayer for creation:** Do creation care concerns come up during sharing times? Pray for sick parts of nature as well as sick people. Are there people with a special calling for this? What about a climate change prayer ministry?
4. **Notice how creation participates in the liturgical seasons:** In the Northern Hemisphere, Easter comes at a time of outdoor rebirth and Advent falls during the darkest time of the year. Find ways to accent these relationships and help others appreciate creation’s part in the drama.
5. **Hold an outdoor service** or tweak an outdoor service you do have. For some of us, an outdoor service consists of carting all our indoor paraphernalia outside. There, on a mowed lawn next to an industrial cornfield, we are less comfortable than usual and derive little benefit from being outside. Think differently about what it means to worship outdoors with creation. Are there ways birdsong can figure in your worship service? Can a naturalist help you learn the names of nearby wildflowers? Can a confession or time of prayer include holding and studying natural objects?

6. **A broader understanding of offering:** In an age of automatic deposit, the pass the plate ritual can lose its meaning. Try incorporating one of these ideas:
 - *A spring offering of flowers* or houseplants might enable people to remember and share natural beauty.
 - *A summer offering of garden vegetables* could provide food for a local food pantry.
 - *A trash offering could be part of a confession.* Participants bring forward bags of trash, acknowledging their need for the Great Householder to recycle the wastes we produce. Also pray for the people who process your trash.
7. **Native plants for altar flowers:** Commit to using native plants rather than chemical-doused store-bought flowers. Use them as an opportunity to teach about your bioregion.
8. **Notice natural materials used in your worship:** List the ways nature provides for your worship, and track where the raw materials come from. Worship materials might include bread, grape juice, water for baptisms, fabric for banners, wood for benches, and so on. Is it possible to get locally grown grapes or wheat for your communion services? If you baptize indoors, could you use water from a river within your local ecosystem or collect rainwater from your property? How beautiful to begin a life of faith with this connection to one's own watershed.
9. **Communion:** Acknowledge the land that grew the wheat and the grapes during communion rituals. Include food for other species on your communion table as a reminder of God's provision of food for all creatures. (Okay, maybe not dead rats, but birdseed and some vegetation are a safe bet.)
10. **Plan a series of worship services** based on non-human images for God.
11. **Sharing devotional time with creation:**
 - Is it possible to have an outdoor area on your church property that encourages people to connect with creation? Add a bench, plant a privacy hedge, put a bird feeder on a patio or take other steps to make this happen.
 - Set aside bulletin board space to run a monthly feature on species that live on your property or in your community.

Suggested Resources

[Anabaptist Bestiary Project](#)

is an alternative rock band of students from Bluffton University under the direction of theologian Trevor Bechtel. Their songs are either about animals or speak in the voices of animals. They reflect on the things that naturalists discover about other creatures and then engage in theological reflection about the behavior and place of these creatures in the world.

Bouma-Prediger, Steven. *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010.

Making wise decisions related to creation care rarely just happens, or happens through logic alone. Instead of asking, “What should we do?” Bouma-Prediger asks, “What kind of people should we be?” See chapter 6, “What Kind of People Ought We to Be?” for a discussion of ecological virtues that can form and sustain those who care for creation.

Chase, Steven. *Nature as Spiritual Practice*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011.

For many of us, time in nature is what sustains our courage, hope and action. Chase provides contemplative exercises for approaching nature with reverence and awe. The *Field Guide to Nature as Spiritual Practice* is intended for outdoor use. It contains roughly the same material but more practices and less theologizing.

Freeman, Charles. “[Borrowed Holy Land: The New Hymnal and Creation Justice](#).” *Unbound: An Interactive Journal of Christian Social Justice*. 18 Dec. 2013. Web. 20 May 2014.

The author reviews three categories of creation hymnody in the new Presbyterian hymnal: creation imagery, creation praise and creation justice. Freeman’s categories are helpful even if you do not use this hymnbook.

Habel, Norman, et. al. *The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011 and Habel, Norman. [Season of Creation](#). The Justice and International Mission Unit of the Commission for Mission, The Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania. Web. 20 May 2014.

The Season of Creation encourages churches to add a four-week liturgical season focused on God as Creator to the worship cycle each year. The season is an opportunity to empathize with the groaning of creation, to celebrate the ways that Christ is connected to creation and to understand the Holy Spirit in relation to creation. The preaching commentary includes theological background for the Season of Creation and commentary on the selected texts. The website contains songs, prayers, litanies, worship resources.

Hart, Lawrence. “The Earth is a Song Made Visible: A Cheyenne Christian Perspective.” In [Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together](#), Steve Heinrichs, ed. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2013.

Hart contrasts the “placelessness” of most Christian services with the attention to local geography found in Native American ceremonies. He calls all of us to rethink our worship in ways that “foster a more communal, intimate and personal relationship to the earth.”

Macy, Joanna. [The Work that Reconnects](#).

Macy’s work focuses on moving people from despair to empowerment using a specific set of practices. Her framework is a spiral with four movements: gratitude, honoring our pain, seeing with new eyes and going forth. See Suggested Spiritual Practice 4.

Sawtell, Peter, ed. [Not Ordinary Times](#). Eco-Justice Ministries, Web, 2014.

Not Ordinary Times is a call to a six-month worship focus that takes the environmental crisis seriously.

Stewart, Benjamin M. *A Watered Garden: Christian Worship and Earth's Ecology*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2011.

This is a brief, lovely book that illustrates the ways in which worship and ecology are interrelated. Topics covered include water, food, seasons and days, communion, offerings, burials. *A Watered Garden* could be a group study for a worship commission, as each chapter includes discussion questions.



A person's hands are shown working on a desk. The person is wearing a dark shirt. On the desk, there is a whiteboard marker, a yellow sticky note, a notebook, and a crumpled piece of yellow paper. The background is blurred.

FOCUS MATERIAL

Focus Material:

Carbon Footprints

What is a carbon footprint?

Your carbon footprint is the amount of greenhouse gas your lifestyle emits in a year's time. Individuals, organizations, cities, nations and products all have a carbon footprint that can be calculated, or at least estimated. This measure includes heating and cooling, transportation, diet and other purchases. Some aspects of your carbon footprint are direct and easy to calculate, such as how many kilowatts of electricity you use in a year. Others are indirect, such as the amount of carbon emissions required to make your computer. Even if the emissions took place in another country, they were made for the buyers' benefit, not the workers' benefit.

Why calculate your carbon footprint?

Doing the math can help you see what changes would lead to the most significant reductions in your contribution to climate change. For a typical North American household, transportation is the single largest source of emissions, followed by housing, food and goods consumed. Meat contributes the highest carbon footprint within the food category.⁸⁵ Canadians, on average, are responsibly for 14.1⁸⁶ metric tonnes of CO₂ emissions per capita. This is about more than three times the global average of 4 metric tonnes per person.⁸⁷

85 Christopher Jones and Daniel Kammen, (2011). "Quantifying Carbon Footprint Reduction Opportunities for U.S. Households and Communities". *Environmental Science & Technology* 45 (9): 4088-4095.

86 [World Bank CO₂ emissions data](#), 2011-2015.

87 [Carbon Footprint Calculator](#).

How do I calculate my carbon footprint?

Below are two of the many carbon calculators available on the web. You provide answers to a series of questions about distance travelled, energy used, income and lifestyle, and the calculator crunches the numbers for you. Most carbon calculators also provide concrete tips on how to reduce your footprint. Play around with different answers to the questions to see which changes would make the most difference.

Foot print calculator

What's your carbon footprint? The Global Footprint Network offers a [Simple Carbon Footprint Calculator](#) with various options to help children or adults analyze their approximate ecological footprint, based on whether they live in Eastern Canada (Ontario) or Western Canada (Calgary).

A [Detailed Carbon Footprint Calculator](#) is available to assess carbon footprint based on home, travel and lifestyle options including diet.

See a [Lifecycle Assessment for a Pair of Jeans](#). That's when a business does a detailed analysis of all steps in the life cycle of a product, from raw materials to waste disposal in order to determine how best to save energy and water..

Focus Material:

Food Resource Sheet

Eating is not optional. Most of us do it at least three times a day, every day, and the average American eats almost a ton of food per year.⁸⁸ That would be over 70 tons of food for the average lifetime. It takes a massive amount of land to feed seven billion people. That means how we choose to grow our food and spend our food dollars is a major creation care issue. Examining our food choices is one of the most important steps toward a sustainable lifestyle.

Discuss at home:

What food choices is our household able to make?
What things that currently limit our food choices could be changed?

Some of us are living on very limited budgets. Some of us need to shop at the nearest convenience store because we don't have transportation. Some of us have plenty of money but are limited by our lack of knowledge about farming, nutrition or the food system. Some of us can't cook, or don't have time to cook. Some of us are trapped in bad habits we can't imagine living without. Many of these things can be changed; others cannot. Identify the choices you do have.

How can we structure our household to encourage healthy eating in modest quantities?

Throughout history, most people's diets were limited by the seasons,

88 Allison Aubrey, [“The Average American Ate \(Literally\) a Ton this Year,”](#) *The Salt*, NPR, 12/31/11.

by lack of refrigeration, by poverty and by rituals such as feasting and fasting. Today, the eating opportunities in North America are almost limitless. What limits do you need for the sake of your own health and to support food justice? For example, many calories are munched in front of the TV or computer. A simple rule limiting eating to the kitchen can make a difference.

How much meat does our household consume and what kinds of meat do we eat? What alternative sources of protein can we draw on?

Meat has always been regulated in the Christian tradition. The Old Testament offers few opinions about how to cook a turnip, but many laws dealt with butchering and eating meat. Most species of animals were off limits. In later times, Lenten practices and other fast days also limited meat eating. For monastics following the Rule of St. Benedict, meat was a medicine for the weak and the sick, not an ordinary food.

Today, the North American lifestyle consumes animal products at a rate that requires mass production of meat and dairy foods. Habitat destruction, cruelty to animals, inefficient use of calories and the challenges of concentrated animal wastes are among the issues that call us to reconsider limits on meat-eating. Christian vegetarians have a strong case. For those who *do* eat meat, the price of pastured, organic and humanely raised meat can quickly limit consumption.

What agricultural practices are best for the long-term

health of the land? How can our household reward farmers who use these practices?

How can we be sure that the workers who grow, pick and prepare our food are paid fairly and have safe working conditions? What opportunities do we have to advocate for justice with our dollars?

[The Sustainable Food Purchasing Guide](#) is a very helpful resource for those trying to answer these difficult questions. It reviews the rationale for sustainable food choices, describes the issues related to different food groups and suggests questions to ask local farmers.

Your Local Ecosystem Focus leader may be able to advise you on farms in your community that are worthy of your support. If budget is an issue, begin by researching just one product you commonly buy and find a brand you feel good about. Stay loyal to that brand.

These difficult questions may nudge us to consider the food system as a whole, not just our own cupboards. They may send us to the voting booth or to our political leaders as well.

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Focus Material:

Through an Ecological Lens

Like a jeweler's tools, the following questions will enable us to see things we might not otherwise notice about creation care when we consider biblical texts. Viewing scripture through a new lens can allow the text to 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.

- A. Noticing nonhuman elements:** Begin by naming the species or ecosystems in the text. Are we overemphasizing the importance of humans in this text at the expense of the rest of creation? Over the centuries, we have tended to view nature as a backdrop to human drama rather than something God loves in its own right. 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? The circle questions will help us attend to these issues each week.
- 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?

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Focus Material:

Local Ecosystem Focus Overview

Session 1

1. **What towns, rural areas and bodies of water are within an 8 km radius of your church building?** A 40 km radius?
2. **What urban areas do your members draw upon** for goods and services? What rural areas provide for urban areas?
3. **Which parts of these circle 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 biome⁸⁹ 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

89 Biomes are large geographical areas of distinctive plant and animal groups, such as grasslands, deciduous forests, deserts, etc.
For information on Canadian biomes, see <http://biodivcanada.ca>

present and healthy in your community? Where would you look for them?

3. **What natural areas are present within your local ecosystems?** What do you know about them? What do you wish you knew? Which of these do you and your class members 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 local ecosystem** do participants exercise “dominion” over the land or other natural resources?
2. **What entities** (i.e. landowners, provincial governments, developers, city planners, etc.) within your local ecosystem exercise the most decision-making power over the landscape? What do they do?

Session 5

1. **What forms of environmental damage** or potential hazards are you aware of within your local ecosystem?
2. **What do you know about income distribution** within your region? What social classes live where?
3. **Is racial segregation a part** of your area? Where do minorities live?
4. **Can you see any relationship 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 local ecosystem?**
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 local ecosystem planning for climate change?**
Are there business or government leaders who are concerned about this?

Session 7

1. **Are there ethnic groups different from yours** living within your local ecosystem? Who lives where? What about 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 local ecosystem are responsible** for overseeing the environmental health of the area? What do they do?
2. **How does one gain input** into these groups?

Session 9

1. **Choose a retail business or industry** that is located within your local ecosystem. 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. **Are there contaminants in your water?**
3. **Where does food come from in your community?** What foods are grown within your circles? Do they feed the local population or go elsewhere?
4. **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 local ecosystem?
2. **What does it mean to be rooted in this community?** What bonds people to this particular locale? How is a sense of place expressed? How has this place shaped your relationship with God?
3. **What areas within your local ecosystem need a sustained commitment?** How might Christ the Root provide that?

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Focus Material:

Suggested Spiritual Practices Overview

Session 1

- **Adopt a prayer of intent:** It is important to remember why we are doing what we are doing. Use a prayer of intent before trying the spiritual practices you select from this curriculum. The prayer below is the one the leader's guide suggests for classroom use. Plural pronouns are replaced with I, me, and so on. You could use this prayer, or write your own prayer of intent if you prefer.

Jesus Christ, Creator and Redeemer of all things—I long to meet you: in the scriptures, in our communities, in creation. I ask for a heart open to beauty, joy and awe. I ask for courage to witness the world's pain.

- **Reflect on the Overview of Spiritual Practices,** found on page #. It lists all the practices suggested in this curriculum. Mark those you definitely want to try, or choose one to practice regularly throughout the quarter.

Session 2

- **Walk your community** with an eye to the landscape, its inhabitants and how they interact. Walk in a part of your local ecosystem that is new to you, or walk a distance you commonly drive, such as the distance from your home to church. You might carry Key Idea question 6 along with you. Did this practice enable you to connect with Jesus and his ministry or with your community in a new way?
- **Bible study:** Choose one of the following texts that were referred to earlier in this session and spend time with it. **Apply Ecological lens questions A and E** (page #).
 - Genesis 6-9, Job 38-42, Jonah 3 and 4, John 3:16, Romans 8:18-25
- 4. **Pray, sing or chant** the Christ hymn in Colossians 1:15-20 outdoors this week, pausing on the word, ALL each time you come to it. What aspect of “all” is God inviting you to see right now?
- 5. **Choose a natural object** you can hold, or an animal it is easy for you to watch. Imagine God’s love extending to this creature.
- 6. **Find a photograph** related to a current environmental issue that troubles you and hold it while you pray for this troubled corner of the world. Imagine God’s love extending to this place, including the landscape, plants and animals involved.
- 7. **Meditate on this quote:**

“[The cross] is a revelation of the Presence at the heart of the universe. It reveals the greatest truth, that we will keep our heart only by giving our heart away, that we will find ourselves only by losing ourselves in love, that we will gain salvation only by spreading our arms wide for one another and for the earth, and that we will be saved together, not in separation.” - J. Philip Newell, *Christ of the Celts*, p. 104

Session 3

Remember to use a prayer of intent such as the one provided in Session 1 to help you focus as you begin.

- **Select your favorite sections of Psalm 104** and rewrite them, replacing the species and ecosystems the psalmist knew with those found within your local ecosystem. How does this change your understanding of the text?
- **Find a “waste space” in your area** and pay attention to it, using a camera or nature journal. What surprises emerge?
- **Visit a natural area** within your local ecosystem that you have never been to before.
- **Memorize** one or more of the scriptures listed for this session.
- **Spend time with nature images for God or Jesus:** rock, wind, water, lamb, pathway, etc.
- **David Kline, an Amish bishop and writer,** reports that the most commonly used prayer book in Amish homes includes “an evening prayer to be read daily.” It includes the line, “Help us not to harm your creatures and creation.”⁹⁰ Make this your own daily prayer.

Session 4

- **Bible Study:** Study and reflect upon one of the four points highlighted in the essay—consider time and place, examine Genesis 1 in the context of the larger biblical story, emphasize our place as fellow members within the web of creation, or seek to know God. Alternatively, study and reflect upon Digging Deeper question 1.
- **Keep the Sabbath:** Along with the responsibility implied in Genesis 1 and 2 is the gift of a day in which we are to let go of duties. We are to simply be in the presence of God and creation. How do you think our environmental predicament would be different if the whole world practiced the Sabbath? For further reflection, read *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight*, by Norman Wirzba. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006.
- **Learn about a creature** that shares your backyard or church grounds.

90 David Kline, “God’s Spirit and a Theology for Living,” in *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 61.

How does it interact with humans and other species? Give thanks for God's unique creation. Electronic resources such as [Natural Regions](#) enable you to quickly limit your search to a particular region or search for an unknown species based on a description.

- **Add a Season of Creation** to your yearly worship cycle. Like Advent and Lent, this is a regular four-week series that focuses on God as creator and our relationship with the Earth. See [Let All Creation Praise](#) for ideas. A related resource is *The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary*, by Norman C. Habel, David Rhoads and H. Paul Santmire, eds. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010. This book explains the idea behind the Season of Creation and includes thoughtful theological essays on how including creation reshapes the various parts of a worship service. The second part offers brief commentaries on the texts that are part of the creation lectionary cycle the authors have developed.

Session 5

- **What forms of environmental damage** or potential hazards are you aware of within your local ecosystem?
- **Read and reflect on the poem, “[Ordnance Plant](#),”** by Joseph Gascho (located on the curriculum website). Are there similar examples of actions with unnoticed environmental consequences in your own history? Pray or journal about these situations. Pray that any toxins in your present community will be revealed and dealt with.
 - **Praying with waste:** If you have a town dump, contaminated site or other hazard within your local ecosystem, visit that site. Walk, observe and pray in this area.
 - **Spend time with a weeping Jesus:** In a journal or prayer, name the things that make you weep over your city or country today. What “things that make for peace” go unrecognized?

Session 6

- **Intercession:** Post a picture on your refrigerator to help you remember to pray for humans or animals affected by climate change. The *National Geographic* site has photo galleries that you could download:
 - [Pictures of a Warming World](#)
 - [Flood, Drought and Climate Change](#)
- **Lament:** Review the projected impacts of climate change for your region. (The Leader's Guide: Local Ecosystem Focus for session 6 provides

information on this.) Then go to a natural area you love—or your own backyard—and imagine what it might look like if these impacts come true. Mourn for the losses this change would entail and write a lament for them.

- **Memorize this sentence:** “I’m a Christian, and I think we should do something about climate change even if it costs us.” Say it to your boss and your city council. Say it to your legislative and parliamentary representatives. Say it to your friends at basketball games and your neighbors at block parties. Write the prime minister. Repeat.
 - Why does it matter that you are a Christian? Politicians tend to respect this voting bloc. They also see Christians as people who network.
- **Use the ecological lens questions** to explore the primary and related passages from Jeremiah listed with the essay.

Session 7

- **Listening to the global community:** For one week, suppose that hearing global voices on issues related to creation care is your priority. Whom will you talk to? What information avenues will you pursue? What messages from this other world challenge you? Pray for someone on the other side of a wall.
- **Listening to opposing perspectives nearby:** For one week, suppose that hearing nearby voices that you disagree with on a particular issue related to creation care is your priority. Whom will you talk to? What information avenues will you pursue? What messages from this other world challenge you? Pray for someone on the other side of a wall.

Session 8

- **Intercessory prayer:** Pray for a local environmental governing body. Learn the names of the people who are part of this body.
- **Biblical models:** Spend time with one or more of the texts related to citizenship or political action in the essay. Apply the ecological lens questions.
- **Read Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*,** devotionally. Who is speaking these words to you today? Do you have a calling to any kind of direct action on behalf of the planet?
- **Monitor yourself:** If you are a person with pronounced opinions about environmental issues, spend this week paying attention to the comments

and assumptions you make about people and groups who disagree with you. Refrain from the following, or note when you do them:

- Making stereotypical or demeaning comments about your opponents.
- Watching media that polarizes issues or demonizes “the enemy.”
- Allowing comfortable assumptions to replace careful thought.

Remember that being a person of peace is not so much about espousing a particular position (though some positions are more compatible with Christianity than others.) Rather, how we inhabit those positions is what marks us as followers of Jesus Christ.

- **Write your own pledge of allegiance:** Read Ellie Schoenfield’s poem, “[Patriotism](#).” In it, she describes her loyalty to the soil. Play around with creative ways to state where your allegiance lies.

Session 9

- **Claiming economic power:** When you wake up tomorrow morning, spend a few moments reflecting on the power you have as a North American consumer. The economic decisions you make today—what to buy, where to shop, how much to save and tithe—will impact your community and the planet we depend on. Think about how you might use your economic power whether it is large or small, to support the work of God’s people.
- **Fast from one of your electronic pastimes** in order to reflect on Mark 4:19 (the seed among thorns) and Matthew 6:33 (seek first the Kingdom). What do these things mean for your life?
- **Breathing our own wastes:** Reread the paragraph about vehicle exhaust in the middle of page 9-4. Then find an idling school bus, truck or car (your own?) and stand behind it for a few minutes. While you are there, pray for those most affected by air pollution. Ask for eyes to see other areas where the costs of your consumption are externalized.

Session 10

- **Seek abundance:** Find a way to fast this week from your usual level of consumption. This could include skipping a meal, giving up meat, making your Sabbath a carbon-free day, biking whenever possible or not entering a store. What simple pleasures did you discover instead?
- **Pay attention to water:** Give thanks for each cup of water you drink this week. Pray for those whose rivers are dried up, whose aquifers are depleted, who have no well.
- **Begin a gratitude journal:** Each day, write about the things you are thankful for. You may find you have a lot to say, even on bad days.
 - **Bible study:** Apply the Ecological Lens Questions to Psalm 23 or the related scriptures listed.

Session 11

- **Seek abundance:** Find a way to fast this week from your usual level of consumption. This could include skipping a meal, giving up meat, making your Sabbath a carbon-free day, biking whenever possible or not entering a store. What simple pleasures did you discover instead?
- **Pay attention to water:** Give thanks for each cup of water you drink this week. Pray for those whose rivers are dried up, whose aquifers are depleted, who have no well.
- **Begin a gratitude journal:** Each day, write about the things you are thankful for. You may find you have a lot to say, even on bad days.
- **Bible study:** Apply the Ecological Lens Questions to Psalm 23 or the related scriptures listed.

Session 12

- **Consider your habits.** What habits, spiritual or practical, sustain faithful earth keeping? What habits or practices threaten it?
- **Review spiritual practices you tried.** Look at the Overview of Spiritual Practices on page # and review the ones that you tried. Decide which practices you want to hold onto in the future. What do you need to do to make that happen?
- **Listen for the sound of creatures singing.** Spend time outside noticing the songs of birds, frogs, insects, wind in trees or other sounds of creation. Offer your own prayers along with these sounds. Alternately, if

there is a naturalist in your congregation and the season permits, have this person lead a listening hike. He or she can help you identify the voices of the birds, frogs and insects you may hear.

- **Pray for your congregation's roots:** Note that Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-20 is suggested as an additional text. Here, Paul speaks of being rooted and grounded in love. Pray his prayer for your congregation.
 - Paul also calls God "the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name." List some of the human surnames in your church directory. With the help of a field guide, list the family names of some species in your region. For example, daisies are in the Asteraceae family; sparrows are in the Passeridae family.
- **Experiment with a spiral.** Joanna Macy is an eco-philosopher who has developed a program called [The Work that Reconnects](#). These exercises are interior work that focuses on moving people from despair to empowerment.
 - Macy's framework is a spiral with four movements: gratitude, honoring our pain, seeing with new eyes and going forth. Macy describes the movement between these four stations as a spiral—not a circle—because they can be repeated many times with deepening levels of understanding. Gratitude develops a sense of wellbeing, trust and generosity. Working out of gratitude, we are then able to face the pain in the world around us instead of avoiding it or masking it. This immersion in pain further enables us to see a wider web of resources available to us. Our sense of community deepens and new possibilities for action emerge. A sense of interconnection with all people and all forms of life is a key part of the work.
 - The spiral and many of the practices used in trainings are available on the web. Macy's four movements resonate with themes in Christianity. She can help us see the Christian tradition's emphases on gratitude, facing pain, the call to community and empowered outreach with fresh eyes.

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Focus Material:

Suggested Household Practices Overview

For more detail on the practices below, see the pages indicated in parentheses.

Session 1

1. **Discuss Digging Deeper question 3** at home with your household. How will you find time to make the questions and practices that this study suggests a priority?
2. **Reflect on the** Overview of Household Practices found on page #. Mark the practices you want to be sure to do.

Session 2

1. **Plan ways to walk, bike or carpool more often.** This could include examining your schedule, repairing a bicycle, getting reflectors, trying out biking or walking routes, etc. In Canada, roughly 48% of greenhouse gas emissions⁹¹ are related to the oil and gas industry and transportation.
2. **Avoid aggressive driving and idling your car.** Gas guzzling driving habits include rapid stops and starts and driving over 100 km per hour. Avoid braking whenever possible by slowing down gradually at stoplights. For information, see [Fuel Efficient Driving Techniques](#). For information on why it is both unnecessary and damaging to the air to idle your car, see [Idling-Frequently Asked Questions](#).

91 According to Government of Canada statistics for **distribution of greenhouse gas emissions by economic sector, Canada, 2013**.



Session 3

1. **The monarch butterfly** is in serious decline. Factors include increased pesticide use and loss of hedgerows and other wild spaces that include milkweed (*Asclepias*). This is the only genus of plants that monarch caterpillars can eat. Add some milkweed to your lawn or garden. If you can't find wild seed, native plant catalogs carry varieties of milkweed. Make sure you plant a variety native to your area. Learn more at [Monarch and Milkweed FAQs](#) on the David Suzuki Foundation website.
2. **How can you make your home or church property hospitable to other species?** Insects serve as the base of the food chain, and 90% of them are like monarch butterflies in that they require a specialized diet. They cannot eat peonies from China or zinnias from Mexico any more than we can eat nightshade or poison ivy. While monarch butterflies are popular and easy to see, what is happening to them is happening to many other insects as well, and the birds that feed on them. Learn more about gardening with native plants and shape your garden accordingly.

Resources:

- [Native Plant Database](#) for Canada
 - [Native Plant Societies](#) in North America
 - [Bringing Nature Home](#) Insights from Doug Tallamy, a Delaware entomologist
 - [Noah's Garden: Restoring the Ecology of our own Backyards](#)
3. **Make a list of household items or foods** that you use daily. Choose one that came from a living thing and trace it back to the creature and ecosystem it came from.

- Learn about this species, independent of its usefulness to humans. What does it need to flourish? What might the author of Psalm 104 have said about it?
- Research the production practices or environmental issues related to this product. Can you lessen your impact by buying fair trade or organic, or making do with less?

Session 4

1. **Make your Sabbath a Carbon Sabbath.** This means eliminating or reducing use of fossil fuels one day a week and living within whatever limitations result.

For Suggested Resources, see:

- [Carbon Sabbath](#)
 - [Kairos Canada's Re-energize: Time for a Carbon Sabbath](#)
2. **Exercise dominion** over an area of your household that you have neglected, such as:
 - finding air leaks and weather stripping
 - checking to make sure your tires are properly inflated
 - setting up a recycling system if you haven't already

Session 5

1. **Locate your local household hazardous waste disposal site.** Learn what items they take and post the schedule for receiving items. Check your house and garage for items such as CFL light bulbs, batteries, oils, paints, pesticides and old medicines. Set up a safe storage area for items on the way to the hazardous waste facility.
2. **Make a list of all the products in your household** that contain toxic chemicals. Can you switch to natural agents or use less of these? Think about when you really need a powerful cleanser or pesticide and when your use of it is just habit. If you want to know what is in the products you use and what studies have been done on these chemicals, see the [Household Products Database](#).

Session 6

1. **Calculate your carbon footprint.** Try one of the online carbon calculators below to calculate your yearly contribution to the atmosphere. Play with the numbers to see what changes would make the most difference in the size of your footprint. New to this idea? See [Carbon Footprints](#).
 - [Simple Carbon Foot print calculator](#). What's your carbon footprint? The Global Footprint Network offers a calculator with various options to help children or adults analyze their approximate ecological footprint, based on whether they live in Eastern Canada (Ontario) or Western Canada (Calgary).
 - A [Detailed Carbon Footprint Calculator](#) is available to assess carbon footprint based on home, travel and lifestyle options including diet.
- Additional household practices related to fossil fuel use appear under Session 10, Simple Abundance.
2. **Think justice, not charity.** Sadly, the poorest people create the least CO₂ emissions but often suffer the grimmest consequences of climate change. Give money to an organization that in some way works with climate change, either by helping disaster victims, raising awareness, mitigating effects, etc. If possible, set up an automatic monthly deposit and think of this offering from the first world to those in need of justice, not charity. Tree planting projects, helping low-income people weatherize, health kits for disaster victims, donations to [350.org](#) are just a few examples.
3. **Organize a [voluntary gas tax group](#):** Group members agree to “tax” their gasoline expenditures in recognition that the price we pay at the pump is not the full cost of using gasoline. They meet to pool their money savings and decide where to give it.

Session 7

1. **Navigate household conflicts:** Even the most amiable households can have disagreements about what creation care steps to implement. Conflicts over who is going to drop off the recycling or whether to buy organic vegetables can discourage doing anything at all. Discuss any such tensions at your house this week. Do you understand the other person's position? Can you find common ground?
2. **Map your consumer goods:** Unseen hands around the world pick our vegetables, sew our clothes and wire our electronics. Walk around your house checking labels. Make a list of where items in your house came from. Pick one or two products you regularly buy and see what you can find out about the country they came from or the industry that produced them there. Even not finding any information tells you something.
3. **Develop Fair Trade brand loyalty:** Read about Fair Trade products and practices at one or more of the sites below. Note that Fair Trade certification requires companies to meet a number of [standards](#), not just fair wages. You probably already know about Fair Trade coffee, but did you know you can also get Fair Trade certified shoes, clothing, basketballs, lotions and more? Find an item you would like to buy fair trade and do the math. What would it cost you per year to make the welfare of the community that produces this item a priority? What adjustments would you need to make in your consumption habits?
 - [Fair Trade Canada](#)
 - [Ten Thousand Villages](#)

Session 8

1. **Remember this sentence from Session 6?** “I’m a Christian, and I think we should do something about climate change even if it costs us.” Say it to your boss and your city council. Say it to your political representatives. Say it to your friends at basketball games and your neighbors at block parties. Repeat again.
2. **Take a walk** around your own neighborhood or your congregation’s neighborhood with a small notebook in hand, and make a list of all the policies you encounter that affect the care of creation. For example:
 - Houses must meet building codes that make them more or less efficient.
 - Someone had to decide how to handle the storm water from the street.
 -

- Some cities have weed ordinances that limit what can grow on a property.
- Do you question the wisdom of any of these policies? Do you see a need for policies that don't exist?
 3. **Choose a new source of news** to follow on a regular basis that could help you become a better caretaker of creation. See Suggested Resources for options.
 4. **Write a letter** to an elected official expressing your views on a creation care issue that concerns you. Politicians consider one voice to represent about 100 people. See Mennonite Central Committee's [How to be an Advocate](#) for tips and adapt their suggestions to a Canadian context. Could your household make advocacy a weekly practice?
 5. **Post guidelines:** Write these three questions on a card and post them near where you watch or read news. Use them to help you evaluate political issues that come by you.
 - Are people speaking on their own behalf for policies that benefit only themselves, or are they seeking the common good and particularly the good of the poor and the vulnerable?
 - Are people considering a given policy's effects on creation as well as on humans when they support it?
 - Can those involved envision their political enemies as part of the solution?
 6. **Encourage someone:** Write a kind note to someone whose ecological leadership, business or farming practices you respect.
 7. **Start a public affairs club** for high school students or young adults in your community. Include an environmental justice focus. According to a study by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, youth who do not attend college have fewer opportunities to learn civic engagement than their college-attending peers do⁹². This often excludes their voices from the public arena.

Session 9

1. **Tools for God's kingdom:** Choose one item you own and find a way to transform it into a tool for God's kingdom, as Richer suggests. Could sharing this resource build community? Can it help you to carry out your vocation? Does someone else need this tool more than you do?
2. **Voluntary gas tax:** The prices we pay for gasoline do not include all of the costs to the environment or the national security costs required to maintain access to fossil fuels. How would your behavior change if the

92 Constance Flanagan, et. al. [Civic Engagement and the Changing Transition to Adulthood](#).

price of gas were, say, \$10 per gallon as it is in some countries? For a week or a month, experiment with a “[voluntary gas tax](#),” setting aside the difference between \$2 per litre and the actual price of gas. Then give the money you raise to an organization or cause you care about. Note that you may find strength in numbers. Consider organizing a voluntary gas tax group.

3. **Tithing** is an ancient practice that reminds us of the importance of sharing our resources with the church to promote the common good. How much of your income before taxes did you donate to your church or other worthy organizations last year? What would you need to give up in order to increase your donations to ten percent of your before-tax income or some other percentage? Try giving this much next month to see how it changes your perspective.
4. **Investments:** Talk about “Digging Deeper” question 8 with your household. Here are places within the Mennonite fold where you can save money and serve others at the same time:
 - The [Mennonite Economic Development Association](#) (MEDA) creates business solutions to poverty by partnering with the poor to start or grow small and medium-sized businesses in developing regions around the world.
 - [Mennonite Foundation of Canada](#). Mennonite Foundation of Canada is the stewardship agency of Mennonite Church Canada, and can help with financial planning from a faith-based perspective.
 - The [Janzi Social Index](#) is a Canadian firm that measures the financial returns of 60 socially responsible investment (SRI) stocks. It is modeled after the Standard and Poor/Toronto Stock Exchange 60 (S&P/TSX 60).
 - [Meritas SRI Funds](#) manages socially responsible investments for individuals and institutions, selecting to invest in companies with practices that promote human dignity, community development, environmental stewardship and peace and justice.

Session 10

1. **Discuss your food choices** with your household using the [Food Resource Sheet](#) provided for this session. In what way is God calling you to practice your faith at the table?
2. **Calculate your carbon footprint.** If you did not already do this during Session 6, try it now. Turn to [Carbon Footprints](#). How much would it cost

to offset your emissions by donating to an organization that promotes renewable power or plants trees? Try offsetting all or part of your emissions this year.

3. **Become aware of what you consume:** For one week, keep a list of everything that you purchase. How did each item enrich your life? Put a star by items that do not fit your values. How might you better align your consumption with your understanding of the good life?

Session 11

All of these practices refer to your congregational “household.”

4. **Score sheet work:** Mennonite Creation Care Network offers a Greener Congregation Score Sheet to help congregations get started. Questions range from buildings to congregational life to worship and encourage a systematic approach. Work through one or more questions on the score sheet.
5. **Set up a borrowing system** that allows people to indicate what items they are willing to share and under what circumstances. Categories could include tools, housewares, vehicles, labor, skills, childcare, items for worship visuals. You could also draft a covenant that people sign when they borrow something.
6. **Set up systems for recycling** or evaluate the ones you do have. Does everyone know about your paper bins? Is there a need to provide for waste that is difficult or inconvenient to recycle, such as batteries⁹³ and old electronics. Research how the items are recycled to make sure they are recycled safely. Announce your region’s monthly hazardous waste collection, or have one person drive a load to save everyone making a trip.
7. **Glean ideas from others:** Visit MCCN’s [congregations page](#) for stories about how other congregations are working together to care for creation.

Note that you will probably have to pay to get rid of alkaline batteries because it is not cost-effective to recycle them. [Call 2 Recycle](#) is one company that does this.

Session 12

The “household” these practices refer to is your congregation and the practices pertain to your corporate worship. This week, think about how your worship might open itself to creation’s presence, creation’s worship and creation’s needs.

1. **Acknowledge the land you worship on:** Cheyenne pastor Lawrence Hart says that in Cheyenne ceremonies, the priest begins by touching the earth four times. In other Native American traditions, a pipe is pointed in the seven directions. Find culturally appropriate ways to pay your respects to the land you worship on in your upcoming worship services.
2. **Add a Season of Creation** to your yearly worship cycle. See *The Season of Creation* resources below.
3. **Intercessory prayer for creation:** Do creation care concerns come up during sharing times? Pray for sick parts of nature as well as sick people. Are there people with a special calling for this? What about a climate change prayer ministry?
4. **Notice how creation participates in the liturgical seasons:** In the Northern Hemisphere, Easter comes at a time of outdoor rebirth and Advent falls during the darkest time of the year. Find ways to accent these relationships and help others appreciate creation’s part in the drama.
5. **Hold an outdoor service** or tweak an outdoor service you do have. For some of us, an outdoor service consists of carting all our indoor paraphernalia outside. There, on a mowed lawn next to an industrial cornfield, we are less comfortable than usual and derive little benefit from being outside. Think differently about what it means to worship outdoors with creation. Are there ways birdsong can figure in your worship service? Can a naturalist help you learn the names of nearby wildflowers? Can a confession or time of prayer include holding and studying natural objects?
6. **A broader understanding of offering:** In an age of automatic deposit, the pass the plate ritual can lose its meaning. Try incorporating one of these ideas:
 - *A spring offering of flowers* or houseplants might enable people to remember and share natural beauty.

- *A summer offering of garden vegetables* could provide food for a local food pantry.
 - *A trash offering* could be part of a confession. Participants bring forward bags of trash, acknowledging their need for the Great Householder to recycle the wastes we produce. Also pray for the people who process your trash.
7. **Native plants for altar flowers:** Commit to using native plants rather than chemical-doused store-bought flowers. Use them as an opportunity to teach about your bioregion.
 8. **Notice natural materials used in your worship:** List the ways nature provides for your worship, and track where the raw materials come from. Worship materials might include bread, grape juice, water for baptisms, fabric for banners, wood for benches, and so on. Is it possible to get locally grown grapes or wheat for your communion services? If you baptize indoors, could you use water from a river within your local ecosystem or collect rainwater from your property? How beautiful to begin a life of faith with this connection to one's own watershed.
 9. **Communion:** Acknowledge the land that grew the wheat and the grapes during communion rituals. Include food for other species on your communion table as a reminder of God's provision of food for all creatures. (Okay, maybe not dead rats, but birdseed and some vegetation are a safe bet.)
 10. **Plan a series of worship services** based on non-human images for God.
 11. **Sharing devotional time with creation:**
 - Is it possible to have an outdoor area on your church property that encourages people to connect with creation? Add a bench, plant a privacy hedge, put a bird feeder on a patio or take other steps to make this happen.
 - Set aside bulletin board space to run a monthly feature on species that live on your property or in your community.

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*Every
Creature
Singing*

