

Ten Types of People who Care About Creation

By Jennifer Halteman Schrock

Recently, the Mennonite Creation Care Network (MCCN) sent a survey to its members that included an open-ended question inviting suggestions.

“Provide discernment tools for finding a creation care niche that fits my congregation,” one respondent wrote.

Another participant suggested that we design a creation care personality type inventory. “There are different types of people who care about creation and sometimes we get into conflict about the best strategies to use. Having a tool to creatively address these differences would be really useful,” she said.

I was intrigued by the fact that two people from different congregations expressed needs that were so similar. It reminded me of a few of the less successful moments from my decade with MCCN. I could recall a time when someone told me that his church could not do creation care because they did not own their own building. I remembered the story of a big-picture friend who struggled to penetrate a creation care committee dominated by doers. A landscaper came to mind who found no way to connect her passion for yard work with her faith until late in life. And I recalled the arrogance most of us fall into when we first attack a problem. Oblivious to the diversity of people who have been chipping away at the issue for the last century, we conclude that we alone have found the correct solution if only others would think just as we do.

We at Mennonite Creation Care Network have always encouraged a big tent approach to creation care and avoided one-size-fits-all prescriptions about what churches should do. We call our member churches Green Patchwork Congregations, emphasizing the many shades of green that make up the body of Christ. Typically, we have emphasized that every geographical and social context is different, but the same could be said about the mix of gifts.

Below is version 1.0 of a typology that names the gifts of a large circle of people who care about creation. I offer it for discussion, in hopes that it will help congregations recognize the gifts they can build on and to provide language for discussing our differences. We are at a critical juncture in history when we cannot afford to leave any of our resources untapped if we are to maintain a livable planet. I am aware that I write from a white, economically comfortable perspective, and the view might look quite different from elsewhere. Some may want to scrap my list and create their own categories.

Acknowledging our Differences

As I thought about how to characterize the people I know who work for the good of creation, I found it helpful to recognize two camps that I'm calling the traditional and the eco-hip. While relationships across this dividing line can be conflictive, more often they are just muddling. The two groups draw on different sources; they use different language and different projects occur to them. Therefore they can't always **see** each other's contributions. The long-term ministries of the traditional may have an eco-justice component that neither they nor their eco-hip counterparts have recognized. Meanwhile, the concerns of the eco-hip may not fit the traditional's faith mold and therefore go unrecognized as well.

The green virtues of the traditional are primarily rooted in faith themes they have inherited--such as "stewardship of the earth"--and practices they learned from their families. The eco-hip draw on contemporary science and the environmental movement and synthesize this with their faith to varying degrees. They are often younger and therefore had the benefit of more instruction in environmental science in school. One example of this shift in curriculum is the fact that my employer—Goshen College—first offered a minor in environmental science in 1990. Today, students can choose from a major in this field and a cluster of three majors in sustainability.

Traditionals may be suspicious of the secular environmental movement even though they have lower carbon footprints than the people *in* it. The eco-hip may be suspicious of the Christian tradition's track record with the environment and therefore the Bible, even though they are doing what the Bible tells us to do. The traditionals bring perseverance and historical perspective to any endeavor; the eco-hip bring new information and ideas. Eco-hip people have hybrid cars and environmental rhetoric; traditionals have canning equipment and Bible verses.

I also see our efforts taking place in three spheres: the household, the region and the big picture. While the three areas support each other, it can be frustrating if your congregation doesn't recognize the sphere in which you work best, or you are in the minority.

Householders:

Home or church life is where this group expresses its concern for the earth. The big picture depresses them; rather, they find hope in being faithful in the spheres of influence they have at hand. If we were using the Apostle Paul's body language from I Corinthians to describe the householders, we might call them hands and feet. "But what should we *do*?" they ask, after a sermon on the intricacies of a creation Psalm. What they decide to do depends on whether they are simple living servants or the more specialized gardeners, foodies or building geeks.

The Simple Living Servants are generalist householders who want to focus on what really matters, not material clutter. Wise use of resources and good parenting come naturally to them. The traditionals in this group may have learned their thrifty ways from depression-era parents or the original *Living More with Less*; the eco-hip have Blessed Earth tip sheets on their bookmarks bars. The traditionals recycle their sweaters into mittens; the eco-hip

build straw bale houses. Traditionals shop at thrift stores to save money; the eco-hip shop at Fair Trade stores to pay just wages. Traditionals hate wasting things; the eco-hip hate chemicals. Both use vinegar to make their own cleaning supplies. The simple living servants add integrity to any congregation. However humbly, they act on what they believe.

For the Foodies, eating is a moral issue. They recognize that how we grow our food has an enormous impact on both farm workers and other species and they eat accordingly. They don't all agree on what the moral issues are, so you will need to ask your foodies whether they are passionate about buying from local farms, avoiding products with palm oil, reducing cruelty to animals or all of the above. Traditional foodies have worn out and recycled three *More with Less* cookbooks by now; eco-hip foodies use *Simply in Season* and an array of vegetarian sources. Careful labeling at potlucks is a starting place for making foodies feel at home and enabling them to share their commitments. The foodies' discipline is an inspiration to all.

The Gardeners are a common type in the Mennonite Church. They overlap with the foodies. They believe all the world's ills can be solved with a backyard garden, or if not, it will at least make you feel better. Many garden for the sheer joy of it and find the work deeply spiritual. Some make it a ministry, providing fresh produce to the local food pantry or gardening space and know-how to their communities. Like the foodies, they understand that *how* we grow our food matters. Traditional gardeners may have grown up on farms; eco-hip gardeners may have learned from organic gardening magazines. I've filed those farming for a living under the professional category below.

The Building Geeks love energy efficiency. The traditionals have caulk guns and a long track record of changing furnace filters on time. They are trying to save money for missions. The eco-hip have Kill-o-Watt meters and pamphlets on ground source heat pumps. They are trying to reduce carbon footprints. Either way, they save the church more money and carbon than anyone else does. Ask them for a tour of the church basement: you'll make a new friend and get tips for your own home.

The Regionally Rooted

The sphere that is most significant for this group is the local community or watershed, but they experience it in different ways. The body part that describes them best might be the heart.

The Naturalists have a deep and abiding love of nature. They camp, hike, watch birds, walk on beaches—and sometimes skip church to do it. While gardeners enjoy cooperating with nature in order to bring forth something practical—like lunch—the naturalists love dragonflies or mountains or palm trees for their own sakes. Whether it is beauty, solitude or wildness, something draws them outdoors. This is where they are most likely to experience the presence of God. Traditional and Eco-Hip naturalists are not too different, except the field guides of the eco-hip are apps instead of tattered books and they have more expensive camping equipment. Naturalists help others see the glory of God in the created world.

The Wounded Witnesses have direct, painful experience with environmental problems in their current or past communities. Maybe they live in a food desert or their children have asthma due to a polluting industry nearby. Maybe they watched their childhood farm bulldozed into a shopping mall parking lot or spent time overseas where they encountered the effects of mining on the local population. The eco-hip are angry and talk about eco-justice and systemic evil; the traditionalists are more likely to accept what happened as just the way things are. The firsthand testimony of wounded witnesses is a powerful gift—and hopefully a compelling motivator—to their congregations and the broader church.

The Watershed Disciples are rooted in—and rooting for—the places where they live. They participate in local organizations that serve the common good and know the channels for getting things done. They are bridge builders as well as joiners. Traditionalists have lived in one area for many years and bring a wealth of historical perspective to their churches. The eco-hip have read Ched Myers and Todd Wynward. This makes them better than many eco-hipsters at articulating the connection between their environmental passions and the Gospel. Watershed disciples spearhead bike-friendly initiatives and take field trips to the local landfill. They extend God's love beyond the walls of their church to the surrounding community and ecosystems.

The Big Picture People

This group brings breadth and vision to their congregations. Their minds romp beyond the household and the region. Big picture people are often connected to other big picture people elsewhere which enables them to pass along outside perspectives. The Apostle Paul might call them the eyes of the body.

The Theologians may or may not have a degree, but they all use God-language to make sense of the world. They have the gift of connecting contemporary culture and environmental issues with the Christian tradition, whether through advanced readings or by asking basic questions like, “What does this have to do with Jesus Christ?” Theologians lead Bible studies, write church vision statements and plan creation worship services. If they are eco-hip, they also go to the Rooted and Grounded conference at AMBS. Theologians remind their churches why we should care about creation and help the other types recognize their gifts.

The Activists believe in the power of political leaders to bring positive change and are sometimes frustrated by the near-sightedness of their more locally focused friends. Activists read widely on environmental issues and receive many action-alert emails. They have programmed their senator's numbers into their phones. Traditional activists may pursue causes such as healthy food and clean water for all. Eco-hip activists might embrace solar legislation, animal rights or ecosystem protection. They have been to at least one climate march and maybe Standing Rock too. Activists embody and explain issues that many find abstract. Because *they* care about injustice in the broader world, their churches might too.

The Professionals: Whether they work with a tractor or a computer, these people generously apply the unique expertise they've developed on the job to creation care. Their gift to the church could be either a visionary new idea or a healthy dose of realism.

Traditionals may resist the green label despite the fact that they are quietly improving practices on their farms or in their industries where even a small change may do a lot of good because of the scale of the operation. Eco-hip professionals have environmental jobs. They might be climate scientists or land managers or environmental educators. Their donated labor is indispensable for some projects.

Nurturing our creation care base

Recently I asked members of a congregation that is very active in creation care what advice they had for other congregations. "Do **something!**" they said.

Not every congregation needs to be at the forefront of creation care. Some of us are busy taking in foster children or planting new churches or serving the homeless. But we can all do **something**. As the list above suggests, there are plenty of starting places. Maybe one of them is to bless the gifts of the people who come to mind when you read the list of types above.

Jennifer Halteman Schrock is the leader of Mennonite Creation Care Network. To join the network or explore their website, see <http://www.mennocreationcare.org/>. Want more guidance on what type you are? Take our quiz under >Start Here > Assess

Possible Sidebars:

For group discussion:

1. Which descriptions do you personally resonate with?
 2. Which types of people are present in your congregation? Which sphere of activity is dominant?
 3. What would you like to learn from a person of your type who is on the opposite side of the traditional/eco-hip divide?
 4. How might several different types that are present in your congregation work together on a project?
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