

JoinTrees to Restore the Earth

JoinTrees is the campaign of Mennonite Men to plant one million trees by 2030 to help restore the earth.

We call on all ages and genders to join this campaign to address climate change with its harmful impacts on God's earth and people. In 1664 John Evelyn wrote in *Sylva, Or A Discourse of Forest Trees*, "trees and woods have twice saved the whole world; first by the ark, then by the cross."ⁱ Now we can work with trees to save the world a third time as they cool the planet.

The World's Need

Our most urgent crisis is climate change with its threat to human life and biodiversity. Deforestation is a major cause of this crisis as tree and forest loss continue, dramatically reducing the earth's most important means to sequester carbon and cool the planet. Since humans began clearing land and logging, the number of trees on earth has fallen by 46 percent.ⁱⁱ

According to the U.S. Forest Service, tree cover in urban and community areas of the U.S. is declining at a rate of about 175,000 acres per year, or around 36 million trees per year.ⁱⁱⁱ Global tree cover loss, according to the United Nations, continues at an estimated 18 million acres each year—roughly 27 soccer fields every minute.



The impacts of this on our biosphere are severe: extinction of animal and plant species, soil erosion, desertification, food loss, forest fires, droughts, floods, increased greenhouse gasses, and global warming. Indigenous people and the rural poor are most vulnerable and affected by deforestation, making this a social justice issue. But with climate change, the entire planet faces an existential crisis as life conditions for vast populations become increasingly distressed—causing suffering, migrations, and acts of desperation.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres observes, "Climate change is happening now and to all of us. No country or community is immune. And, as always, the poor and vulnerable are the first to suffer and the worst hit."^{iv} Climate justice is an increasingly urgent concern for all of God's people as we acknowledge the impacts on poor and vulnerable populations and work to ensure a better future for present and future generations.

According to a UN report, "the health of ecosystems on which we and all other species depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever, affecting the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide. Deforestation and desertification – caused by human activities and climate change – pose major challenges to sustainable development and have affected the lives and livelihoods of millions of people. Forests are vitally important for sustaining life on earth and play a major role in the fight against climate change. And investing in land restoration is critical for improving livelihoods, reducing vulnerabilities, and reducing risks for the economy."^v

Protecting and planting trees is one of the most essential solutions for climate justice and climate change, as forests are the best and most cost-efficient means for sequestering climate-warming carbon dioxide.^{vi} According to the United Nations, "Forests are a major, requisite front of action in the global fight against catastrophic climate change – thanks to their unparalleled capacity to absorb and store carbon."^{vii} Along with the United Nations, many organizations not only call for controlling deforestation but also planting trees to reforest the earth and curb climate change.

God's Call to Us

The problem of climate change is so large that we can feel paralyzed in responding. But planting trees is something we can do as a practical solution.

A rabbinical teaching says if people claim the world is ending and the Messiah has come, first plant a tree, and then see if the story is true.^{viii}



The importance of trees in God’s design and our place as stewards of the earth is seen in Hebrew and Christian scriptures.^{ix} Trees are so important for life in God’s plan of shalom that they are featured in the very first and last chapters of the Bible.

In the first chapter of Genesis, we read that God called forth plants and trees of every kind. And God saw that it was good. In the second creation account, we read that out of the ground God made to grow every tree that is

pleasant to the sight, good for food, and the “tree of life” in the Garden of Eden, a



grove of trees. This woodland garden represents what its Creator intended on earth: beauty, biodiversity, and abundance, where trees give life for all with God. And God calls us to be stewards of the earth. Tending trees that they may play their important part in the design of God’s creation is essential in our stewardship.

In the very last chapter of the Bible, we see the “tree of life” again as a central part of the new earth. In the final vision of Revelation, we have “the river of the water of life... flowing from the throne of God... On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” As essential as they are, the Bible provides laws for the protection of trees, like what we find in Dt 20.19-20 and Jewish tradition.

Our Mennonite confession recognizes God’s call to us as stewards of the earth.

- “We believe that everything belongs to God, who calls us as the church to live as faithful stewards of all that God has entrusted to us.”
- “As stewards of God’s earth, we are called to care for the earth and to bring rest and renewal to the land and everything that lives on it.”^x

In their stewardship practice, Mennonites have a long history of planting trees. In the 19th century, Mennonites in the Ukraine planted 5 million trees. During World War II, Mennonite conscientious objectors in British Columbia planted 17 million trees on Vancouver Island alone!^{xi} In the last 70 years,

Mennonite Central Committee has planted millions of trees in its development work around the world.^{xii}

In our stewardship of the earth, we care for trees. But trees provide much more for us. Not only are trees God’s natural means to moderate the climate, trees also help to:



- Provide food and comfort,
- Increase human wellbeing,
- Clean the air of pollutants,
- Reduce energy consumption,
- Support biodiversity,
- Enhance community life.

With all their ecosystem services, for every \$1 invested in trees returns nearly \$4 in benefits. This ratio illustrates how much more trees do for us than we do for them. For more on the benefits of trees, see *Trees of Life for the Earth*.^{xiii}

Description of JoinTrees Program

This program will involve collaborating with partners (identified below) for tree planting projects on:

- Private, business, and church properties,
- Marginal farmland devoted for reforestation,
- Degraded international forest lands,
- Public rights-of-ways along roads and highways,
- Land in city, county, and state parks,
- Mennonite international projects,
- Mennonite agency and retirement center land.

In addition to planting trees in Canada and the U.S., we will organize international service trips to plant trees alongside indigenous people on degraded forestlands. These may also be education delegations to learn about deforestation and reforestation in countries like Haiti,



Belize, Paraguay, Ecuador, DR Congo, and Kenya with Mennonite populations.

Funding

Trees cost anywhere from 50 cents for seedlings to \$150 or more for balled and burlap stock. Lawn trees planted at prominent locations at homes, churches, or organizations will likely be containerized or balled and burlap stock. The greatest number of plantings will likely be seedlings on larger scale projects, where we may plant as many as 680 tree seedlings per acre (for 8' x 8' reforestation spacing). For projects beyond what volunteer groups can do, contractors can plant seedlings for around \$1.00 each. There may be additional planting costs for mulch, stakes, and trunk guards where needed. In some cases, local groups may cover their own costs. For other projects, Mennonite Men may provide matching cost-share assistance with contributions it receives for JoinTrees.

Sources of funding for this program may include:

- Individual, corporate and congregational donors,
- Voluntary contributions for carbon offsets and climate change reparations,^{xiv}
- Mandatory payments from companies and utilities required to buy carbon credits,
- Contributions from our annual campaign letters,
- Agencies like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with funds for certain projects,
- Family and organizational foundations.



Collaboration

Various groups in and outside the church may be engaged as partners in this campaign. These include:

- Mennonite congregations,
- The Center for Sustainable Climate Solutions—a partnership between Goshen College, Eastern Mennonite University, and Mennonite Central Committee,
- Mennonite Creation Care Network,
- Climate Justice—a partnership between MC USA, Center for Sustainable Climate Solutions, and Mennonite Creation Care Network,
- Merry Lea Environmental Center of Goshen College,
- Mennonite Camping Association and its camps,

- Mennonite Disaster Service building projects,
- Mennonite Central Committee with international reforestation projects,
- Tree planting companies for assisting with project planning, tree planting, and materials,
- Local community organizations,
- City foresters, city, county, and state park managers, and Department of Transportation,
- Chapters of the International Society of Arboriculture and other arborist groups,
- U.S. Forest Service and National Parks.

Strategies

For this campaign, Mennonite Men is working to:

- Educate about trees in God's design for the earth,
- Promote this campaign across the U.S. Canada,
- Create a network of resources and participants,
- Locate land for planting trees,
- Provide plans for tree planting and care,
- Coordinate tree planting opportunities,
- Encourage tree steward training for aftercare,
- Request and direct contributions for projects,
- Track trees with the *Plant-for-the-Planet* App,
- Report progress toward reaching our objective.

We use the *Plant-for-the-Planet* App for people or groups to participate in JoinTrees. Plant-for-the-Planet is a campaign associated with the United Nations to plant one trillion trees. As shown to the right, groups or individuals who want to participate in our program can use this App to make donations, register trees they've planted, send gift trees, set up competitions, and share our program with others by a text or email invite. 100% of contributions made through this

App go toward our program. This App will also track all trees planted with JoinTrees and show this in the center of the App.



Supporting aftercare of newly planted trees is critical to success. Planting a tree is one thing. Getting it established is another. Our goal is not just to plant trees, but see that they are established and thrive. This is where individual and group service will come into play. We will provide direction and resources for tree care and encourage some people associated with planting projects to complete a tree steward training that the Department of Natural Resources and other entities provide throughout the United States and Canada. Depending on available resources, people may be employed as tree stewards to provide follow-up care, such as watering, mulching, and pruning.

Resources

After 33 years in pastoral ministry, Steve Thomas has turned his attention to urban forestry along with other work for Mennonite Men. As a certified arborist with the International Society of Arboriculture and a graduate student in urban forestry, Steve brings knowledge, skills, and passion for this work with Mennonite Men.

As a tree evangelist, Steve is available to preach at Mennonite congregations and various organizations and promote JoinTrees. He has been engaged in congregations for preaching assignments on trees in God's creation and consulting for tree planting plans.

Steve and other participants will create or provide the following resources on our JoinTrees Mennonite Men web page:

- Tree planting instructions,
- Tree care practices,
- Regional lists of recommended trees,
- Area lists of volunteers and contractors for planting trees,
- Sources for tree seedlings and supplies,
- Materials on arboriculture and woodland management,
- Worship and education materials for congregations.

Participate

Join the campaign. What you and your group can do:

- Devote land for planting trees,
- Help with site preparation, planting, and tree care,
- Provide financial support.

To participate,

- Visit [JoinTrees web page](#)
- Call Steve Thomas at +1-574-202-0048
- Email SteveT@MennoniteMen.org

Join trees to restore the earth.



November 2, 2020

End Notes

ⁱ Epigraph of *Applied Tree Biology* by Andrew Hiron and Peter A. Thomas (Wiley-Blackwell, 2018).

ⁱⁱ According to Project DrawDown. See <https://www.drawdown.org/solutions/forest-protection> for a summary of the problem and proposed solutions.

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.fs.fed.us/nrs/pubs/jrnl/2018/nrs_2018_nowak_005.pdf

^{iv} <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/climate-justice/>

^v 2019 Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Service. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/biodiversity/>

^{vi} “Forest pathways offer over two-thirds of cost-effective natural climate solutions mitigation needed to hold warming to below 2°C and about half of low-cost mitigation opportunities. Reforestation is the largest natural pathway and deserves more attention to identify low-cost mitigation opportunities.” As with most forest pathways, reforestation also has well-demonstrated co-benefits, including biodiversity habitat, air filtration, water filtration, flood control, and enhanced soil fertility. Bronson W. Griscom, *et al.* (2017). Natural climate solutions. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. 114(44), 11645-11650. doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1710465114.

^{vii} Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation. <https://www.un-redd.org/single-post/2018/10/03/Forests-A-natural-solution-to-climate-change-crucial-for-a-sustainable-future>.

^{viii} A teaching in the Islamic tradition claims that when all hope is lost, planting trees should continue for planting is good in itself. The

prophet Muhammad said, “When doomsday comes, if someone has a palm shoot in his hands, he should plant it.” Nalini Nadkarni, *Between Earth and Sky: Our Intimate Connections to Trees* (University of California Press, 2009), 234.

^{ix} Our interdependent relationship with the earth is reflected in how Genesis 2 tells the story of our beginnings. God formed the first human, *Adam*, from the earth, *adama* (2.7) then put him in the garden to till and keep it (2.15).

^x *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995), Article 21.

^{xi} Steven M. Nolt and Harry Loewen. *Through Fire and Water: An Overview of Mennonite History* (Herald Press, 2010), 174, 211-213.

^{xii} For a history of Mennonite Central Committee tree planting, see: <https://mcc.org/centennial/100-stories/planting-trees-hope?decade=%2760s>

^{xiii} For a literature review of scientific studies demonstrating social, economic and environmental benefits of trees, see Jessica Turner-Skoff and Nicole Cavender. The Benefits of Trees for Livable and Sustainable Communities. *Plants, People, Planet*. 2019; 1:323–335.

^{xiv} For the example of Parkview Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, VA, see <https://mennocreationcare.org/virginia-church-pays-climate-change-reparations/>. One calculator may be seen at: <http://earthdeeds.org/confirm-all.php?teamid=362>. JoinTrees may be one of the options in EarthDeeds for carbon offset contributions built into the registration process for future Mennonite conventions. Another example to help offset carbon generated by air travel is Tree Trust of Centre Wellington, ON and Elora Environment Centre at <https://eloraenvironmentcentre.ca/tree-trust/>.