Opening the Letter
A Congregational Guide to God’s Earth Is Sacred

Welcome!

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

On behalf of the authors of the ecumenical “open letter” God’s Earth Is Sacred, welcome to this opportunity to engage your congregation in reading the letter and embodying its call.

We—a diverse group of eleven clergy and lay theologians—wrote this letter with you and your congregation in mind. At the invitation of the National Council of Churches’ (NCC) Eco-Justice Working Group, we came together in September 2004 at the National Cathedral (Washington D.C.) with a passion for addressing one of the most harmful and insidious “false gospels” of our time: the notion that care for God’s sacred, yet wounded, Earth should not concern Christians. We came together aware of the overwhelming evidence that this false gospel had gained traction, whether by design or simply as a given within the context of our consumer-oriented society, not only within the lives of individual Christians and congregations throughout our country, but also within our most influential halls of power.

Over our days together we prayed, worshiped, broke bread, and poured passion and countless hours into creating this letter. In a spirit of prayerful discernment and mutual respect we spoke with voices that reflected our unique experiences of God’s activities in the world—experiences that expressed the richness of our ecumenical, ethnic, gender, and age diversity. Like slender strands of cord bound together to make a durable and useful rope, we bound our diverse perspectives together to create a common voice. Our common voice, we prayed, would be strong enough to confront the aforementioned false gospel and to inspire Christians to engage in urgently needed, Christ-centered, Earth-healing acts. The result is this letter to you.
How to Use this “Opening the Letter” Guide

Group Structure and Size
This guide was designed for small, congregational groups. Any existing group—an adult study class, a prayer circle, a social concerns committee, “house groups,” a stewardship committee—can make use of this guide and even adapt it to best meet its needs. Ad hoc groups (e.g., a committee working to start a congregational recycling program) and time-limited events (e.g., a congregational retreat, a Lenten study series) can also serve as excellent forums for engaging in this guide.

Ideally, groups should consist of between five and fifteen people. If you have more than ten people in a group, you may wish to consider breaking out into smaller groups, especially during group sharing times.

Facilitation
Each session needs at least one (or more, if the group is larger) person who is willing to do minimal preparation and then facilitate each session’s flow and discussion times. Willingness is the key for facilitation—not expertise in the subject area or experience as a leader or teacher.

Because easy-to-use facilitator overviews and facilitation steps accompany each session, your group may wish to rotate the role of facilitator. Doing so often helps to create a shared sense of group ownership. It is likely that the person who initially convened the group will facilitate Session One. During Session One, the group may want to designate other facilitators for the remaining three sessions.

1Many of the ideas in this section were shaped by two excellent study guides: Simpler Living, Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective, edited by Michael Schut (published by Earth Ministry and Living the Good News Press, 1999); and Community with Children and the Poor, by the United Methodist Task Force for the Bishops’ Initiative on Children and Poverty (published by Cokesbury, 2003).
One of the main facilitator responsibilities is to help foster a respectful, safe environment in which participants can express their thoughts, feelings, questions, and creativity. In order to help with this responsibility, we have provided a set of Group-Building Guidelines in the Appendix. We suggest that your group adapt these guidelines to meet their needs and commit to honoring the guidelines during each session.

**Time and Setting**
In order to foster meaningful reflection and discussion, please allow for a minimum of one hour for each session. You may wish to do one session per week or to do them in series over the course of a retreat. (For suggestions on using these materials within a retreat setting, please see suggestions in the Appendix.)

Settings for each session can be as informal as you would like: from a Sunday school class room to a group members’ home. Informal settings can especially contribute to a more relaxed, discussion-enhancing atmosphere.

Whether you find yourself in an urban, rural, suburban, or "wilderness" setting, your group may choose to be outside for part or all of every session. Doing so can greatly enhance your immediate experience of God’s sacred creation. Session Four strongly suggests that the "Reflection" portion or all of the group's time be spent outside. If your group chooses this option, the group may want to select an outdoor location and begin planning for this in Session One.

**Session Format**
Each of the four sessions contains the following components:
- Facilitator Overview (to be read by the facilitator before each session)
- Welcome and Overview
- Brief Introductions
- Reflection
- Group Sharing
- Focused Read of God’s Earth Is Sacred
- Activity and Discussion
- Review and Looking Ahead
- Closing Prayer

In addition to these components—which are meant for facilitators—each session has an accompanying hand-out for participants.
Overview of Sessions
The general flow of this series is one that starts from a place of glimpsing God’s awe-inspiring work and presence through the “window” of creation. Flowing on from this place of awe, we begin to look at faithful responses to God’s activities within creation—especially in light of current threats to creation. Then we move into equipping ourselves with tools for creation-caring work and into concrete commitments for applying these tools.

- Session One: “Opening Our Eyes to the Sacred”— invites participants to reflect on their experiences of the Holy as “understood through the things God has made.” This time of personal exploration will set the foundation and tone for the rest of the series.

- Session Two: “Opening Our Ears to Creation’s ‘Groaning’”—this second session helps participants to better understand current expressions of “creation’s groaning.” This session helps to awaken a sense of expansive care and possibility.

- Session Three: “Opening Our Hearts to God’s Call, Equipping Ourselves for Action.” This session introduces participants to “guiding norms” for living into our call to care for God’s creation.

- Session Four: “Open to God’s Renewing Work.” This final session invites participants to celebrate their new insights and to commit to ongoing creation-care work.

Whether you find yourself in an urban, rural, suburban, or “wilderness” setting, your group may choose to be outside for part or all of every session. Doing so can greatly enhance your immediate experience of God’s sacred creation.
Dear Facilitator,
This first session invites participants to reflect on their experiences of the Holy as “understood through the things God has made.” This time of personal exploration will set the foundation and tone for the rest of the series.

In assisting with this session, please:
1. Make enough photocopies of the following for all group participants
   • Session One Participants Handout.
   • Group-Building Guidelines.
   • Copies of God’s Earth is Sacred: An Open Letter to Church and Society in the United States.

2. Bring the following to the session:
   • For discussion times: a flip chart with easel, or butcher paper with masking tape (for hanging paper), and markers.
   • For the Activity: paper (“scrap” and/or copier paper is fine), pens, pencils, color markers, crayons, and/or collage materials (e.g., old magazines, colored and wrapping paper scraps, pressed leaves, etc.).

3. Just prior to the session:
   • Arrange the group seating into a circle, if possible; this will enhance group participation.
   • Place one set of handouts on or under each seat.
   • Set up two pieces of flip chart or butcher paper—one labeled “Emerging Questions” and the other “Emerging Insights from Group Activity.”

4. Keep track of time and help to keep group discussions consistent with the Group-Building Guidelines.

5. Consider engaging in part or all of this session outside—especially the Reflection portion.

May God richly bless your time together with inspiring glimpses of God’s presence.

Brief Introductions (5 minutes)
Each participant briefly introduces her/himself. After the Reflection, there will be a time to get to know one another better.

Welcome and Overview (5 minutes)
Please read or summarize:
Welcome to this series that explores the Christian belief that “God’s Earth Is Sacred,” and to the ecumenical letter that bears this belief as its title. At the invitation of the National Council of Churches in Christ, eleven leading theologians came together in the fall of 2004 to write this important letter to their fellow sisters and brothers in Christ.

The letter affirms the Christian belief that “the created world is sacred—a revelation of God’s saving power and gracious presence filling all things.” In this first session of our “Opening the Letter” series, we will explore the reality of this Christian affirmation by reflecting upon our own most meaningful revelations of God’s saving power and gracious presence “through the things God has made.”

Before we get started, let’s please take a few moments to read the handout on Group-Building Guidelines. We’ll be using these guidelines throughout this four-week series, especially during our discussion times.

Refer participants to the “Group-Building Guidelines” handout and give them a few minutes to read the guidelines. After they have done so, ask if there are any questions, additions, etc. then guide people into the Reflection.
Reflection & Group Sharing (15 minutes)
Have volunteers read aloud Readings 1-7, allowing for a brief pause (about thirty seconds) for reflection after each reading. Following all the readings, encourage participants to let their bodies and minds relax and to invite the Holy Spirit into this prayerful time. Offer the following prayer, or one of your own:

Our loving, Creator God,
Through the guidance of Your Holy Spirit, we ask that You open our eyes so that we may see Your glory through creation’s “windows.” Please be with us now as we look for Your wisdom through the windows of our own lives, the lives of all gathered here, and throughout Your sacred creation.
In Jesus’ name, Amen.

After the prayer, read or summarize the following and then invite participants to reflect silently:

As Romans 1:20 and these readings suggest, “God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through things God has made.” Please reflect back on a time in your life when these words from Romans have been very real for you. Take a few minutes, in silence, to remember this time in as much detail as you can—colors, smells, people, your own feelings, sounds, other creatures and plants, the appearance of the sky, any details that come to you.

After a few minutes of silence, invite participants to share their stories and insights.

Note: It is not necessary to “go around the circle”—participants should speak if and when they feel led to do so. As facilitator, you may want to start the sharing by offering your own story. If your group is large (more than 10 people), you may want to have people break into smaller groups or “pair up” to share their insights—this will save time and allow for greater depth of sharing.

Focused Read of God’s Earth Is Sacred (15 minutes)
Read or summarize the following:
Thank you for being willing to share these holy experiences with one another. We’re now going to transition into a time of looking closely at a portion of the ecumenical letter that I mentioned earlier: God’s Earth Is Sacred.

As with the Reflection, ask for volunteers to read aloud the “Affirmation” Readings 1-4. After the readings, ask the group to briefly discuss the following questions:
• What struck you most when hearing these Affirmations?
• What questions do these Affirmations raise for you?

Take brief notes of (or ask a volunteer to do so) their questions on the piece of paper labeled “Emerging Questions.” After the discussion, put this sheet to the side—the group will use it again at the end of the session.

Activity and Discussion (20-30 minutes)
This Activity will help participants begin to apply the session’s insights into the congregation’s life. Please follow these steps:
1. Ask participants to come up with a list of congregational activities that will occur within the next three months (e.g., worship services, Sunday school classes, fellowship dinners, prayer groups, a building project, a retreat, etc.). Record (or ask a volunteer to do so) these activities on a piece of flip chart paper, white board, etc.
2. Ask each participant to select one activity that most interests her/him and then form small groups with others who have chosen the same activity. In their groups, ask participants to imagine and discuss the following question (you may want to write this question on the piece of flip chart paper as well):

What would this activity look like if it were shaped to reflect the idea that “the created world is sacred—a revelation of God's saving power and gracious presence filling all things”?

Encourage each group to let their creativity flow. Invite them to use the supplied paper, markers, collage materials, flip chart paper and markers, etc. if these are useful in conveying their ideas. Let them know that they’ll be presenting their ideas to the rest of the group and they may even want to consider a creative “enactment,” poem, etc. Give them about ten minutes for this collaborative activity.

3. Reconvene the entire group, ask each small group to give a brief presentation, then discuss the three questions below. Take brief notes (or ask a volunteer to do so) of these responses on a piece of flip chart paper titled “Emerging Insights from Group Activity”:

- What struck you most in what you heard and saw in the small group presentations?
- How might our congregation be different if we did the things that were suggested?
- What are some of the first steps for making these things happen?

Save this page of Emerging Insights from Group Activity for Sessions Three and Four.

**Review and Looking Ahead (10 minutes)**

With participants, wrap up the session:

- Refer to the Emerging Questions page, invite participants to take a few moments to silently read over the items on the Emerging Questions and Emerging Insights from Group Activity pages—let them know that this page reflects some of the fruits of the session’s discussions. Ask for volunteers who may have an interest in exploring one of these questions, with the intent of sharing with the group at the next session. Volunteers may want to refer to the “To Learn More …” list on their handouts.

- Have a conversation about whether or not the group would like to rotate facilitators. If the group chooses to do so, make sure that the person who committed to facilitating Session Two knows how to obtain the materials that he/she needs.

  Be sure that the facilitator for Session Three holds onto the Emerging Insights from Group Activity page above.

- Point out the “Preparing for Session Two” items listed on their handouts and encourage them to engage in them before the next session.

- OPTIONAL: Let participants know that the final session will take place outside. This location should be in a place that would be conducive to a group reflection. If you, as facilitator, have already chosen a location, please inform participants of it and help to prepare them for it (e.g., “You’ll need to wear casual shoes and bring a jacket”). If you haven’t chosen a location, this is a good time to ask participants where they may want to go for this final session—a place that might be reminiscent of the “sacred” place they envisioned today.

**Closing Prayer**

Offer the following prayer, one of your own, or one from another participant.

Our loving Creator,

Thank You for the blessing of fellowship—for the gift of Your presence through our combined insights, questions, and hopes. Thank You for opening our eyes, once again, to Your eternal power and divine nature. Bless us, now as we leave, that You will continue to open our eyes and grow our ability to see and serve You through Your sacred creation.

In Christ's name, Amen.
SESSION ONE: Opening Our Eyes to the Sacred

Participants Handout

REFLECTION

Reading #1
The words of Romans 1:20: “Ever since the creation of the world, God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made.”

Reading #2
The words of Psalm 19:1: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork.”

Reading #3
The words of Saint John Damascene [“Da-ma-see-n”], who lived from the year 675 to 749: “The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God.”

Reading #4
The words of Hildegard of Bingen, who lived from 1098 to 1179: “God’s Word is in all creation, visible and invisible … All creation is awakened, called, by the resounding melody, God’s invocation of the Word … all of creation is a symphony of joy and jubilation.”

Reading #5
The words of Martin Luther, who lived from 1483 to 1546: “God writes the Gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars … If you truly understood a grain of wheat, you would die of wonder.” (Excerpt from Luther’s Works.)

Reading #6
The words of George Washington Carver, who lived from 1864 to 1943: “To me, Nature in its varied forms is the little windows through which God permits me to commune with [God], and to see much of [God’s] glory, by simply lifting the curtain and looking in. I love to think of Nature as wireless telegraph stations through which God speaks to us every day, every hour, and every moment of our lives.” (Excerpt from Carver’s essay, “The Love of Nature,” in Guide to Nature [December 1912].)

Reading #7
The words of Anne Frank, who lived from 1926 to 1945: “The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely, or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet and alone with the heavens, nature, and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature. As long as this exists, and it certainly always will, I know that then there will always be comfort for every sorrow … And I firmly believe that nature brings solace in all troubles.” (Excerpt from The Diary of a Young Girl.)

AFFIRMATIONS

Reading #1
• We stand with awe and gratitude as members of God’s bountiful and good creation.
• We rejoice in the splendor and mystery of countless species, our common creaturehood, and the interdependence of all that God makes.
• We believe that the Earth is home for all and that it has been created intrinsically good (Genesis 1).

1All biblical passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
Reading #2
• We believe that the Holy Spirit, who animates all of creation, breathes in us and can empower us to participate in working toward the flourishing of Earth’s community of life.
• We believe that the people of God are called to forge ways of being human within creation that enable socially just and ecologically sustainable communities to flourish for generations to come.
• And, we believe in God’s promise to fulfill all of creation, anticipating the reconciliation of all (Colossians 3:11), in accordance with God’s promise (II Peter 3:13).

Reading #3
• We believe that, in boundless love that hungers for justice, God in Jesus Christ acts to restore and redeem all creation (including human beings). God incarnate affirms all creation (John 1:14), which becomes a sacred window to eternity. In the cross and resurrection we know that God is drawn into life’s most brutal and broken places and there brings forth healing and liberating power. That saving action restores right relationships among all members of “the whole creation.” (Mark 16:15)

Reading #4
• We believe that the created world is sacred—a revelation of God’s saving power and gracious presence filling all things. This sacred quality of creation demands moderation and sharing, urgent antidotes for our excess in consumption and waste, reminding us that economic justice is an essential condition of ecological integrity.
• We cling to God’s trustworthy promise to restore, renew, and fulfill all that God creates.
• We long for and work toward the day when churches, as embodiments of Christ on Earth, will respond to the “groaning of creation” (Romans 8:22) and to God’s passionate desire to “renew the face of the earth.” (Psalm 104:30)

Preparing for Session Two
• Read God’s Earth Is Sacred—please see the accompanying handout.
• Please commit to spending at least twenty minutes exploring the following web page: www.greenfacts.org/ecosystems/index.htm. As you explore this web page, you may wish to take notes. This web page was produced by GreenFacts—an independent, non-advocacy, multi-stakeholder non-profit organization based in Brussels, Belgium. Its mission is to provide non-specialists with unbiased scientific information on environment and health matters.” This particular web page provides a user-friendly, “faithful summary” of the United Nations Millennium Ecosystem Assessment—a comprehensive scientific study on the connections between human well-being and environmental changes.
• Find one current news item—one that really strikes you—that relates to how humans are currently treating God’s Earth. Bring this news clipping, photo, etc. to the next session.

To Learn More …
… about what other Christians have to say about God’s creation, please visit the following sites:
• National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Programs: www.nccecojustice.org—you may especially want to check out the “Anthology of Church Policy” to see what your own denomination has to say about God’s creation.
• Web of Creation: www.webofcreation.org.
• The Evangelical Environmental Network: www.creationcare.org.

2If you do not have home Internet access, please consider other options: going to your local library, using a computer at your church (if one with Internet access exists), asking a fellow group member to share her/his computer with you, etc.
Dear Facilitator,

Building upon participants' experiences of God’s creation (from Session One), this second session helps them to better understand current expressions of “creation’s groaning.” Rather than being a fear- or guilt-producing session, this session focuses on awakening a sense of expansive care and possibility.

As you assist with this session, please:

1. Make enough photocopies of the following for all group members:
   • Session Two Participants Handout.
   • A few extra copies of the Group-Building Guidelines (if you anticipate having new people join in the session).

2. Bring the following to the session:
   • For discussion times: a flip chart with easel, or butcher paper with masking tape (for hanging paper), and markers.
   • For the Activity session: enough 8½”x11” paper and markers for each participant, and masking tape.

3. Just prior to the session:
   • Arrange the group seating into a circle, if possible; this will enhance group participation.
   • Place one handout on or under each seat.
   • Set up two pieces of flip chart or butcher paper—one labeled “Emerging Insights” and the other labeled “Emerging Questions.”

4. Keep track of time and help to keep group discussion consistent with the Group-Building Guidelines.

5. Consider engaging in part or all of this session outside—especially the Reflection portion.

May God richly bless your time together with a sense of empathy with the parts of God’s creation that “groan” for healing and with a vision of redemption, through Christ, for all creation.

**Brief Introductions (5 minutes)**

If there are new people at this session, suggest that each participant briefly introduce her/himself. After the Reflection, there will be more time to hear from one another.

**Welcome and Overview (10 minutes)**

Please read or summarize:

**Welcome to the second session of this series that explores the ecumenical “open letter” titled, God’s Earth Is Sacred. During the last session, we focused on the portions of the letter that declared, “the created world is sacred—a revelation of God’s saving power and gracious presence filling all things.” During this second session, we will explore how this declaration helps us to hear and respond to “creation’s groaning,” an expression found in Romans 8. As we “alert the ears of our spirits” (to use the words of Saint Bonaventure) to this groaning, we will also begin to open hopeful pathways for helping to “renew the face of the Earth” (Psalm 104:30).**

If there are new people joining the group this session, continue with:

**Before we get started, let’s take a moment to glance over the Group-Building Guidelines that we received in the last session.**
During this time, anyone who has volunteered to follow up on an item listed on the last session’s Emerging Questions sheet can briefly report his/her insights and findings.

After doing so, please move people into the time of Reflection.

**Reflection (15 minutes)**

Encourage participants to let their minds and bodies relax and to invite the Holy Spirit into this prayerful time. After a moment of silence, slowly read or summarize the following reflection:

*Last week we prayerfully reflected upon the words of Romans 1:20 and recalled those sacred places in our lives where we have glimpsed “God’s eternal power and divine nature.” I invite you to envision that place once again, and to remember how you felt in that place.*

Pause for several moments then read or summarize the following:

*Now, as you remember this place that is so key to your spiritual formation, please listen to these words from Romans 8: “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God … the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, for redemption …”*

*While indeed, creation offers glimpses of the One who creates and sustains it, creation also groans in pain and longs for redemption from the One who will redeem it.*

In the same way that you previously reflected upon a place in creation where you have glimpsed God’s glory, I now invite you to reflect silently upon a place where you have heard a cry for God’s healing. Perhaps you heard this through the on-line reading that you did in preparation for this session, or in a news item that you brought for our time today, or somewhere within your own life experience. Perhaps you have even heard this cry for healing in that place that, in our last session, you identified as sacred. Please take a few minutes to remember this place of “groaning” with as much detail as possible, including what you felt at the time.

After a few minutes of silence, invite participants to take out the handout below their chair. Read or summarize the following:

*Let us now share in the litany found on your handout. The words of this litany come from Romans 8 and from the God’s Earth is Sacred letter that we are currently studying. Going around the circle, we’ll take turns reading one of the “Voices,” and we’ll all join in reading the “All” portions in between the Voices.*

Go around the circle and have participants take turn reading one of the “Voices,” with the entire group reading the “All” sections.

**Note:** As facilitator, you may want to read “Voice #1” to start the litany.
Group Sharing (15-20 minutes)

Invite participants to share:
1. their stories and insights from the previous Reflection; and/or
2. a description of the news item that they brought to this session, and what struck them about it.

For this time of sharing, it is not necessary to “go around the circle”—participants should speak if and when they feel led to do so. As facilitator, you may want to start the sharing by offering your own story. If your group is large (more than 10 people), you may want to have people break into small groups or “pair up” to share their insights—this will save time and allow for greater depth of sharing.

Focused Read of God’s Earth Is Sacred (30 minutes)

Please read or summarize the following:

We're now going to transition into a time of looking closely at a portion of the ecumenical letter that we just used in our litany: God’s Earth Is Sacred. We’re going to hear contrasting, yet related, pairs of readings from scripture and from portions of the letter. The first reading in the pair reinforces the Biblical reality that God’s Earth is sacred. (In some cases the Biblical reading includes words in their original Greek and alternative translations from the original Hebrew; these words appear in italics.) The second reading, from the ecumenical letter, calls us to consider the spiritual and moral consequences that arise when we do not treat God’s creation as sacred.

Ask for four volunteers to read aloud the Group Readings, 1-4. After each of the “Reading Pairs,” ask the group to briefly discuss the questions below. On the two pieces of flip chart paper take note (or ask a volunteer to do so) of responses and questions. Briefly summarize responses on the “Emerging Insights” sheet and any questions on the “Emerging Questions” sheet.

• After Reading Pair #1: How do you define “sin”? How do you react to Patriarch Bartholomew’s statement, “To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin”?
  You may want to explain to participants that the Patriarch is the primary spiritual leader for all Orthodox Christians throughout the world.
  Also, if you feel that the group would find it helpful, you may want to offer excerpts from theologian Frederick Buechner's definition of sin:

  “…sin is whatever you do, or fail to do, that pushes [God, Nature, and others] away, that widens the gap between you and them and also the gaps within yourself.”

  Sin is our tendency “…to make ourselves the center of the universe, pushing away centrifugally from that center everything that seems to impede its freewheeling.”

• After Reading Pair #2: The Scripture reading tells us that through Christ, God reconciles the entire “cosmos,” and “all things, whether on earth or in heaven.” How does this belief strike you?

• After Reading Pair #3: Genesis 2 expresses our first vocation as humans. Does reading the alternative Hebrew translation “to serve and to preserve,” rather than “to till and to keep,” change your perception of our original call? Why or why not?
  If participants wish to discuss these words and the word “dominion,” found in Genesis 1:26, you may want to refer them to the reading on their handout “On ‘Earthkeeping’ and Dominion” and give them time to read it.

• After Reading Pair #4: How do you react when you hear about our “special responsibility” as “citizens of the United States”?

After the discussion, put the group’s notes to the side for use at the end of the session.

Activity (15 minutes)
Read or summarize the following:

We’ve discussed many complex, intellectually- and emotionally-rich topics during this session. This next activity allows us to step away from discussion and re-enter a more silent and reflective space.

If you’ve ever studied poetry in school, you’ve probably been asked to write a Haiku. And, as our session winds down, we’re each going to try our hand at Haiku writing in order to get to the heart of our current thoughts and feelings. We seek this “heart” because it helps us to know where the Holy Spirit may be stirring our understandings and actions.

For the subject of your Haiku, please consider these two contrasting words: “groaning” and “redemption.” And, as far as a bit of background on Haiku poems and notes on their structure (three lines: five syllables in the first line, then seven syllables in the second, then five in the third), please see the “On Haiku Poems” section on your handout.

Distribute blank paper, markers, and pens—one of each for each person. Ask that participants write their poem using the marker—large and clear—so that others in the group can read their poems from across the circle. Let people know that they’ll have approximately ten minutes to write their poems and you will let them know when their time is nearly finished. (Some participants will need more than this amount of time. With one or two minutes remaining, ask people how much more time they may need and try to arrive at a group consensus for an end time.)

After the chosen “end time,” read or summarize the following and allow participants several minutes to write a response:

As you finish your poem and we end this time of silence, I ask you to reflect on one final question: “What one thing can I do this week to help make the ‘redemption’ I expressed in my poem come to life?” Please write your response, with your pen, on the back of your poem. When you’re ready, please come forward and post your poem (on a prominent wall or on an easel if outside).

After everyone has posted their poems, invite them to read their poems to the group—if they wish—and/or share the response that they wrote on the back.

Review and Looking Ahead (10 minutes)
With participants, help to wrap up the session:

• Refer to the Emerging Questions page. Ask for volunteers who may have an interest in/be willing to explore one of these questions, with the intent of sharing with the group at the next session. Volunteers may want to refer to the “To Learn More …” list on their handouts.

• Point out the “Preparing for Session Three” items listed on their handouts and encourage them to engage in them before the next session.

Closing Prayer
Invite participants to take a few moments to silently read over the items on the Emerging Insights page—let them know that this page reflects the fruits of the session’s discussions. Offer the following prayer, one of your own, or one from another participant.

Our loving Creator,
We know that where two or more of us are gathered that You are in our midst. Thank You for Your presence with us today—for exercising our ability to listen to the places where Your wonderously-made creation groans for healing and care. Bless us now as we leave so that we may continue to grow in our ability to see and serve You as members of Your sacred creation.
In Christ’s name, Amen.
REFLECTION^1

Reader #1
Romans 8 declares, “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God … creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”
All: God’s creation will be set free from its bondage.

Reader #2
But today, “God’s creation delivers unsettling news. Earth’s climate is warming to dangerous levels.”
All: God’s creation will be set free from its bondage.

Reader #3
“90 percent of the world’s fisheries have been depleted.”
All: God’s creation will be set free from its bondage.

Reader #4:
“Coastal development and pollution are causing a sharp decline in ocean health.”
All: God’s creation will be set free from its bondage.

Reader #5:
“Shrinking habitat threatens to extinguish thousands of species.”
All: God’s creation will be set free from its bondage.

Reader #6:
“Over 95 percent of the United States’ forests have been lost.”
All: God’s creation will be set free from its bondage.

Reader #7:
“Almost half of the population of the United States lives in areas that do not meet national air quality standards.”
All: God’s creation will be set free from its bondage.

Reader #8:
Romans 8 also declares, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, for redemption …”
All: O God, You set all captives free,
Awaken our senses so that we might know creation’s groanings, beauty, and longings.
Enliven our wills so that we might hunger to work with You for the liberation of Your whole creation.
In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

GROUP READING^1

Reading Pair #1
From Psalm 104: “O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures … When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.”
And, from the God’s Earth Is Sacred ecumenical letter: “To continue to walk the current path of ecological destruction is not only folly, it is sin. As voiced by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who has taken the lead among senior religious leaders in his concern for creation: ‘To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation … for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying wetlands …

^1All biblical passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
for humans to injure other humans with disease … for
humans to contaminate the Earth’s waters, its land, its
air, and its life, with poisonous substances … these are
sins.’…”

**Reading Pair #2**
From John 3:16 and Colossians 1:15-20: “For God so
loved the cosmos, that he gave his only son…”;
“…in Christ all things hold together … and through
him, God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace
through the blood of his cross.”

And, from God’s Earth Is Sacred: “We have listened
to a false gospel that we continue to live in our daily
habits—a gospel that proclaims that God cares for the
salvation of humans only …”

**Reading Pair #3**
From Genesis 2:15: “The Lord God took the human
and put the human in the garden of Eden to serve and
preserve it.”

And, from God’s Earth Is Sacred: “We have listened
to a false gospel that we continue to live in our daily
habits—a gospel that proclaims … that our human
calling is to exploit Earth for our own ends alone.”

**Reading Pair #4**
From Psalm 24:1: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that
is in it, the world, and those who live in it.”

And, from God’s Earth Is Sacred: “…[Let us] ac-
knowledge the special responsibility that falls to those
of us who are citizens of the United States. Though
only five percent of the planet’s human population, we
produce one quarter of the world’s [global warming] emissions, consume a quarter of its natural riches, and
perpetuate scandalous inequities at home and abroad.
We are a precious part of Earth’s web of life, but we
do not own the planet and we cannot transcend its
requirements for regeneration …”

---

**On “Earthkeeping” and Dominion**
(From an conversation with Calvin B. DeWitt from the
Environmental Review Newsletter, 1996: www.environ-
mentalreview.org/vol03/dewit.html.)

On earthkeeping, the reference there is to Genesis
2:15 where Adam is expected to till and to keep the
garden. To till, is the Hebrew word ‘abad; elsewhere in
the Bible outside of agricultural context, this word gets
translated, serve. So we read Joshua 24:15 “Choose ye
this day whom you will serve (‘abad,) as for me and my
house we will ‘abad Jehovah.” In Genesis Adam is asked
to ‘abad the garden. The idea is that the garden—the
creation—serves us and other creatures by providing
habitat, food and shelter, and beauty. And in turn we
must serve it. So there is this idea of con-service, con-
servancy, con-servation.

…And after ‘abad, the next piece to chew on is the
word to keep, which is a translation of the Hebrew
word shamar. That word is best known in the blessing
of Aaron in Numbers 6:24, “The Lord bless you and
keep you.” The Lord bless you and shamar you. When
that blessing is invoked for people, it expects God to
keep them with physiological integrity, with psycho-
 logical integrity, with proper connections with family,
relatives, other human beings, soil, air, land, water.

There is a second word in Hebrew that also means to
keep, but it means to keep as one would pickles in a jar.
In Genesis 2:15 the shamar word is used, the one
meaning to keep in dynamic integrity not the one
meaning keep as one would pickles in a jar.

There is a Jewish environmental organization Shomrei Adamah, meaning keepers of the Earth, that
promotes stewardship of creation. Shomrei is a vari-
ant of the word shamar. This is a long standing Jewish
concept as well as a word roughly similar to the word
stewardship, and a richer one.
If you read Genesis 2:15 in the Hebrew, you read it for what it says. But put into English we see these words through the eyes of their translators. That is not to say there are some translators who have not worked in a more literal way. There is an 1898 version of the Bible called Young’s Literal Translation of the Holy Bible, that translates the word abad as serve, that Adam was asked to serve the garden, published long before our present-day ecological concern.

What comes from unpacking this passage in Genesis 1:28 and seeing it in the context of the rest of the Bible is that dominion—whatever we have called it—really means service. In the Christian tradition the example of dominion as service is given in Philippians 2:6-8 of Jesus Christ who, “Counting equality with God a thing not to be grasped, he takes the form of a servant and is obedient even until death, yes death upon a cross.”

Genesis 1:28 by itself which says people are given dominion, can certainly be misinterpreted as domination, but as soon as you get to the next chapter, Genesis 2:15, service comes in and then in the New Testament you see the one who has been given all dominion takes the form of a servant. You can hardly take the example of Jesus as someone who forcefully dominates.

On Haiku Poems

Haiku is a type of poetry from the Japanese culture. Haiku combines form, content, and language in a meaningful, yet compact form. Haiku poets, which you will soon be, write about everyday things. Usually they use simple words and grammar. The most common form for Haiku is three short lines. The first line usually contains five (5) syllables, the second line seven (7) syllables, and the third line contains five (5) syllables. Haiku doesn't rhyme. A Haiku must “paint” a mental image. Traditionally and ideally, a Haiku presents a pair of contrasting images; working together, they evoke mood and emotion. A Haiku can convey any mood or emotion—humor, anger, hope—and draws richly from elements of creation.

Preparing for Session Three

• Please read the “Guiding Norms for Churches in Society” portion of the God’s Earth Is Sacred open letter before the next session. Feel free to take notes on anything that intrigues, confuses, inspires you. Please bring this handout, and any notes on it, with you to the next session.

• Reflect daily on your Haiku poem and act on your response to the question “What one thing can I do this week to help make the ‘redemption’ I expressed in my poem come to life?”

To Learn More …

… about creation-care theology:
• National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Programs: www.nccecojustice.org.
• The Evangelical Environmental Network: www.creationcare.org.
• Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen (editors), Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church’s Response, Augsburg Fortress (2001).

… about the current state of God’s creation:
• Union of Concerned Scientists: www.ucsusa.org.
• United States Environmental Protection Agency: www.epa.gov.
• Worldwatch Institute: www.worldwatch.org. Annually, Worldwatch publishes their comprehensive State of the World—you can order a copy through their website.
Dear Facilitator,

Building upon participants’ experiences of God’s creation (from Session One) and hearing expressions of “creation’s groaning” (Section Two), this session introduces “guiding norms” for living into our call to care for God’s creation.

As you assist with this session, please:

1. Make enough photocopies of the Session Three Handout for all group participants.

2. Bring the following to the session:
   - For discussion times: a flip chart with easel, or butcher paper with masking tape (for hanging paper), and markers.
   - For the Activity session:
     - The “Emerging Insights from Group Activity” sheet from Session One.
     - Paper (“scrap” and/or copier paper is fine), pens, pencils, colored markers, crayons, extra pieces of blank butcher/flipchart paper, and/or collage materials (e.g., old magazines, colored and wrapping paper scraps, pressed leaves, etc.).

3. Just prior to the session,
   - Arrange the group seating into a circle, if possible; this will enhance group participation.
   - Place one handout and pen/pencil on or under each seat.
   - Make colored markers, pencils, and/or crayons available to participants throughout the session.
   - Set up two pieces of flip chart or butcher paper—one labeled “Emerging Questions” and the other “Emerging Insights from Group Activity.”

4. Keep track of time and help to keep group discussion consistent with the Group-Building Guidelines.

5. Consider engaging in part or all of this session outside—especially the Reflection portion.

May God richly bless your time together with a clear sense of calling and a confidence in your ability to care for creation.

Welcome and Overview (5-10 minutes)

Please read or summarize:

Welcome to this third session of this series that explores the ecumenical open letter, God’s Earth Is Sacred. During the last two sessions, we focused on the portions of the letter declaring (1) that “the created world is sacred” and (2) that we can hear and respond to the places in which God’s world “groans” under the weight of exploitation and disregard.

During this session, we will build on our previous insights to explore more deeply why and how, as Christians, we should respond to creation’s groaning. Using the “guiding norms” section from the open letter we will focus on equipping ourselves for prayer-filled and effective action.

During this time, anyone who has volunteered to follow up on an item listed on the last session’s Emerging Questions sheet can briefly report his/her insights and findings. Also, if anyone would like to report back on how they expressed the “redemption” part of the Haiku they wrote during the last session, they should feel free to do so now.
Reflection (10-15 minutes)
Ask participants to take the “Reflection” handout and ask for three volunteers to read aloud Readings 1-3. After volunteers choose their readings, let everyone know that there will be a brief pause (about thirty seconds) for reflection after each reading. As the reflection begins, encourage participants to let their bodies and minds relax and to invite the Holy Spirit into this prayerful time.

After the three readings, offer the following prayer, or one of your own:

Our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer,
Please open our hearts to hear Your calling in our lives—so that we may rejoice in finding the place where the deep gladness that You create within us meets the deep hungers and “groanings” of Your world. And, in finding this place, please equip us for living joyfully into our vocations—into serving and preserving all that You hold dear.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.

After the prayer, read or summarize the following:

Let us now take time to prayerfully reflect on these readings. Please take a few minutes to consider each of the three “For Personal Reflection” items on your handout. As you do so, you may want to write words, draw images, etc. under each of the three items on your handout (feel free to use the markers, pencils, and crayons).

Group Sharing (10 minutes)
After several minutes of silence, and it seems that participants have finished their reflections, invite them to share their insights on any or all of the three items in the “For Personal Reflection.” It is not necessary to “go around the circle”—participants should speak if and when they feel led to do so. As facilitator, you may want to start the sharing by offering your own insights. If your group is large (more than 10 people), you may want to have people break into small groups or “pair up” to share their insights—this will save time and allow for greater depth of sharing.

Focused Read of God’s Earth Is Sacred (15 minutes)
Read or summarize the following:

We’re now going to transition into a time of looking closely at a portion of the ecumenical open letter, God’s Earth Is Sacred, that relates to our calling to “serve and preserve” God’s creation and to the tools that we can call upon to live into our calling. At this point, please take out your copy of the open letter, and go to the section titled, “Guiding Norms for Churches in Society.”

These norms can be seen as tools for living into our vocation; or, in the words of the open letter, as “standards and practices of moral excellence that we ought to cultivate in our personal lives, our communities of faith, our social organizations, our businesses, and our political institutions." Hopefully you’ve had a chance to read over the guiding norms and to make notes on anything that struck, confused, intrigued, or encouraged you. Please take a moment to glance over your handout again and over any notes that you made on it.

After everyone has had a chance to review their handouts, invite them to briefly discuss the following questions:

- What most struck you in reading these eight “norms?”
- What questions do the norms raise for you?

Take brief notes of (or ask a volunteer to do so) these questions on the piece of paper labeled “Emerging Questions.” After the discussion, put the group’s notes to the side for use at the end of the session.

Activity and Discussion (30 minutes)

Part 1: Choosing a “norm”
Please read or summarize the following:

Our activity/discussion time today consists of two parts:
(1) another brief, personal reflection—this time on the connection between your vocation and the norms—and (2) a small-group discussion and activity that will explore these norms within the context of our congregation.
So first, please take a moment to look back at what you put on your handout during our reflection time for question #3: “How might your deep gladness meet the world’s deep hunger?”

Now, choose one of the guiding norms that seems to best coincide with your response to question #3. This may not be a perfect match, but the norm should at least be reminiscent of the feelings and ideas that you had when you wrote your response.

For example, in response to reflection question #3 someone might say, “The deep gladness that I experience when I’m gardening could help to meet my city’s hunger for green spaces, fresh and affordable produce, and revitalized relationships among my neighbors; I can envision that helping to start a community garden would be a place where my deep gladness and these hungers could meet.” A coinciding norm for this person’s response might be “Justice—creating right relationships, both social and ecological, to ensure for all members of creation the conditions required for their flourishing.”

If making this connection—between your response to #3 and a guiding norm—seems like too much of a stretch for you, then please just choose a norm that most appeals to you.

Give participants a moment find either a coinciding norm or one that most appeals to them; then continue:

*Hopefully the norm that you have chosen helps to add texture and a sense of direction to your unique calling. This is to say, based on the Justice norm, a first step for our imaginary gardener might be to convene an initial planning group consisting of neighbors, who bring a wide diversity of perspectives, as well as an environmental scientist. In this way the garden planning process will honor “human dignity and social participation” of the members of the immediate neighborhood while honoring “the conditions required for the … flourishing” of all members of God’s creation.*

*May God richly bless your time together with a clear sense of calling and a confidence in your ability to care for creation.*
Part 2: Applying the Norm to Congregational Life

Invite participants to gather in small groups with others who have chosen the same norm. Once settled into their small groups, encourage them to briefly discuss why the norm resonates with them.

As groups are talking, display the Emerging Insights from Group Activity sheet from Session One; then continue reading or summarizing:

You may remember that in Session One we made a list of activities that will occur in our congregation within the next three months, and that we asked ourselves “What would this activity look like if it were shaped to reflect the idea that ‘the created world is sacred’?” At the end of that session, we came up with possible new directions for these congregational activities. I invite you to look over these ideas again, simply as a way of refreshing your memory of those activities and areas of congregational life that most sparked your enthusiasm.

With the breadth of congregational activities before them, please discuss the following two questions with your group:

1. How does our congregation (through its activities, day-to-day life, ongoing ministries, etc.) currently embody our chosen norm?
2. What are some of the practical and hopeful ways in which our congregation could embody this norm more fully?

Take notes (or ask a volunteer to do so) of their responses on the blank piece of flip chart/butcher paper you titled Emerging Insights from Group Activity.

Save these pages of “Emerging Insights from Group Activity” (from Sessions One and from this session) and/or give them to the facilitator of Session Four.

After several minutes of conversation, continue reading or summarizing:

As a group, choose one or more of your responses to question #2—“What are some of the practical and hopeful ways in which our congregation could embody this norm more fully?” Now your group will have a chance to practice articulating these responses to the rest of the congregation. Your group may want to choose from the following to articulate your responses:

• Create a descriptive, inspiring bulletin insert
• Write a brief article for a bulletin or newsletter
• Make an eye-catching bulletin board display
• Create a skit or other creative verbal announcement (e.g., a song) that could be performed during a worship service
• Create a special blessing to be used during a worship service

Here is an example: one small group responded to #2 saying: “To more fully embody the creation-caring norm of ‘frugality,’ two ‘sewing circle’ members (present in our small group) offered to make cloth napkins for all of our fellowship gatherings.” To articulate this response, the small group decided to offer a special blessing, during a worship service, for members of the sewing circle—a blessing that would announce the members’ willingness to use their gifts (their “deep gladness”) to care for God’s sacred creation. This ritual included a blessing over the members’ hands, over their time of fellowship during their work, their materials, and over the fruits of their work.
Encourage each group to let their creativity flow. Invite them to use the supplied butcher/flip chart paper, markers, collage materials, and markers, etc. if these are useful in conveying their ideas. Let them know that they’ll be presenting their ideas to the rest of the group. Give them about ten minutes for this collaborative activity. Then, reconvene the entire group and ask each small group to give a brief presentation.

Review and Looking Ahead (10 minutes)
With participants, help to wrap up the session:
• Refer to the Emerging Questions page. Ask for volunteers who may have an interest in/be willing to explore one of these questions, with the intent of sharing with the group at the next session. Volunteers may want to refer to the “To Learn More …” list on their handouts.
• If your group has chosen to meet outside for all or part of Session Four, make sure that participants know of the meeting location and any special details (e.g., “Dress appropriately for the weather”).
• Point out the “Preparing for Session Four” items listed on their handouts and encourage them to engage in them before the next session.

Closing Prayer
In closing, offer the following prayer, one of your own, or one from another participant.

Our loving Creator,
We thank You for calling us to the most awesome work of stewarding Your mysteries. We ask that You help us follow Christ’s humble and compassionate example as we live into this calling. And we ask that You continually nourish our deep gladness and equip us for Your greatest work.
In Christ’s name, Amen.
SESSION THREE: Opening Our Hearts to God’s Call, Equipping Ourselves for Action
Participants Handout

REFLECTION

Reading #1:
Please listen to the words of Genesis 2:15 that announce our first calling as newly formed human beings: “The Lord God took the human and put the human in the garden of Eden to serve and preserve it.”

Reading #2:
Please listen to St. Paul’s reiteration of our calling, as expressed in 1 Corinthians 4:1: “Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”

Reading #3:
Please listen to the words of theologian Frederick Buechner: “[The word vocation] comes from the Latin vocare, to call, and means the work a [person] is called to by God … The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

For Personal Reflection
1. Identify and describe your “deep gladness(es).”
   You might want to do so with words, images, etc.

2. Name and describe what you consider to be “the world’s deep hunger.”
   If it’s helpful, you may want to reflect back on some of your insights regarding “creation’s groaning”—perhaps from your Haiku—from the previous session.

3. How might your deep gladness(es) meet the world’s deep hunger? In other words, in what practical, life-giving ways might the fruits of your deep gladness help to “serve and preserve” God’s world today?

Preparing for Session Four
Read over the “A Call to Action…” portion of the God’s Earth Is Sacred open letter before the next session. Feel free to take notes on anything that intrigues, confuses, inspires, etc. you. Please bring the letter, and any notes on it, with you to the next session.

To Learn More…
… about creation-care ethics:
• Larry Rasmussen, Earth Community, Earth Ethics, Orbis (1997).

1All biblical passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version. The quote from Frederick Buechner comes from Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, Harper & Row, 1973.
Dear Facilitator,

Building upon the past three sessions, this final session invites participants to celebrate their new insights and ability to apply these insights. Unlike the other sessions, this one begins immediately with the Reflection time.

As you assist with this session, please:

1. Use the Emerging Insights from Group Activity lists from Sessions One and Three to create (on flip chart or butcher paper) a consolidated list of congregational activities and creation-care ideas. Here is an example of how you might want to structure your group’s consolidated list:

   **Congregational Activity Creation-Care Ideas**
   - Weekly worship services
     - Include God’s broader creation in the “prayers of the people”
   - Vacation Bible school
     - Host all sessions outside with a reflection time on the Romans 1:20 passage
     - Take a field trip to a local recycling center; give the children home recycling tips
   - Buildings and grounds
     - Work with our Buildings and Grounds Committee to explore less-toxic cleaners and landscaping methods;
     - With this committee, explore switching some of our most-used light bulbs to energy/money-saving, compact fluorescent bulbs

2. Make enough photocopies of the Session Four Handout for all group participants.

3. Bring the following to the session:
   - For discussion times: a flip chart with easel, or butcher paper with masking tape (for hanging paper), and markers.
   - For the Activity and Discussion session:
     - Your consolidated list of the activities and ideas from the Emerging Insights from Group Activity sheets.
     - Various colored markers or stickers.
     - A sign-up sheet with space for contact information (name, phone number, email, and address) for those who want to continue to meet now that the series is ending.

4. If the group has chosen to spend part or all of this session outdoors, arrive at the chosen site prior to the other group members. Allow yourself enough time to “scope out” the site for a good place for the short “Silent Walk” (Option #1 below) or the “In-Place” reflection (Option #2).

5. Just prior to the session:
   - If the group will be sitting at some point, arrange group seating into a circle, if possible.
   - Place one handout and pen/pencil on or under each seat. If the group is meeting outside, arrange to distribute handouts during the session.

6. At the beginning of the session, facilitate the Reflection using the suggested options. Then, follow the flow and instructions that accompany each of the sections.

7. Keep track of time and help to keep group discussion consistent with the Group-Building Guidelines.

May God richly bless your time together with a sense of celebration and a vision for your ongoing, creation care journey.
REFLECTION

OPTION #1—Outside: “Silent Walk” (20-30 minutes)
This is a time for participants to open their senses to the presence of the Holy in the world immediately around them—whether this be in an urban, suburban, rural, or “wilderness” setting. Greet participants as they arrive. Once everyone has arrived, invite them to gather in a circle and to enter a time of prayerful silence. Then read or summarize the following:

Over the last three sessions, we have opened ourselves to one another and to the Holy Spirit. Today, we have another opportunity, in silence, to open senses to the presence of the Holy in our midst. Let us do so in the spirit of the verse that was central to our first session: Romans 1:20, which again reads, “God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made.”

We’re going to take a silent walk—and I will guide us. As we take this silent walk, I invite you to open every sense—your vision, sense of smell and touch, hearing—to all that is around you. Two times during the walk, we’ll stop and momentarily break our silence, and I’ll read two scripture verses: one from Jeremiah 17 and the other from Revelation 22. At the end of the walk we’ll gather again in a circle.

As we enter into silence, I offer you a question to ponder during our walk:
“How shall we continue to cultivate our shared calling to ‘steward the mysteries of God?’”

Then begin the walk again. After another five-to-ten minutes, stop and read the following to the group:

“The angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

Begin the walk again. At the end of the walk, reconvene in a circle—either standing or sitting. From their experience of the walk, invite each person to identify one word (e.g., “gratitude,” “concern”) that comes to his/her mind/heart and to share it with the group as he/she feels led to do so. When everyone has shared their “one word,” simply say “Amen.” Then move into the Group Sharing time below.

OPTION #2—Outside or Inside: “In-Place” Reflection (15 minutes)
Greet participants as they arrive. When everyone has arrived, invite them to take a seat within the circle. Encourage them to let their bodies and minds relax and to invite the Holy Spirit into this prayerful time. Then read or summarize the following:

In the Quaker tradition, silence provides a pathway for listening more deeply to the voice of God or what many call “the Inner Light.” Sometimes, Quakers use “queries,” or centering questions, to help focus their silent journeys. In a similar way, let us now enter into a time of silence. As we do, I invite you to prayerfully consider the following query:

“How shall we continue to cultivate our shared calling to ‘steward the mysteries of God?’”

We’ll take a few minutes to enter the silence and, if you feel led to do so, please ponder the query. Then I’ll offer two scripture readings, one from Jeremiah 17 and the other from Revelation 22. After the readings, we’ll have several more minutes of silence and I’ll end our reflection by simply saying “Amen.”
As you enter the silence, repeat the query above. Wait five minutes or so before offering the following reading:

“Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the steam. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of the drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.”

Allow the silence to continue for several more minutes before reading:

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

Allow for several more minutes of silence then end the reflection by simply saying “Amen.”

Group Sharing (10 minutes)

Seated in a circle, invite participants to share their insights from the previous Reflection. For this time of sharing, it is not necessary to “go around the circle”—participants should speak if and when they feel led to do so. As facilitator, you may want to start the sharing by offering your own insights. If your group is large (more than 10 people), you may want to ask people to break into small groups or “pair up” to share their insights—this will save time and allow for greater depth of sharing.

Towards the end of this time, anyone who has volunteered to follow up on an item listed on the last session’s Emerging Questions sheet may briefly report his/her insights/ findings.

Focused Read of God’s Earth Is Sacred (10 minutes)

After the Group Sharing, read or summarize the following:

We’re now going to look at the final portion of God’s Earth Is Sacred: the “Call to Action.” In our previous session, we spent some time focusing on our unique callings and vocations: those places where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep hungers. We also spent time exploring tools—certain “norms”—that can help us live into our callings.

This final “Call to Action” section doesn’t mince words. It urges us to actively commit to making our vocation as “stewards of the mysteries of God” real and lasting. The Call to Action reminds us that we “serve and preserve” God’s creation not only in our words, but also in our action; and not only when it seems convenient to do so, but also in ways that constantly permeate the fabric of our personal and congregational lives.

At this point, please take out your copy of God’s Earth is Sacred and any notes that you may have taken on the Call to Action section. Take a few moments to glance over it.

After everyone has had a chance to review their handouts, read or summarize the following:

The Call to Action states that rather than relegating “care and justice for creation to the periphery of our concerns”—or seeing it as just another competing “program alternative”—that such work “…must undergird and be entwined with all other dimensions of our churches’ ministries.” What are your thoughts on this point of view?

Invite participants to take several minutes to respond to this question.
Activity and Discussion (20 minutes)

Part 1: Choosing priority congregational areas
Please read or summarize the following:

Our activity/discussion time today consists of two parts: (1) identifying those areas of congregational life into which we feel most led to integrate creation care and justice and (2) discussing how we can help to make sure that this happens.

Display your consolidated list (with Congregational Activity & Creation Care Ideas) from the Emerging Insights from Group Activity sheets—explain to the group that this is a consolidation of the compiled lists of congregational activities and their discussion of ways in which they could weave creation care and justice into the activities. Distribute either the colored markers or the stickers (one marker or three stickers per person); then continue reading or summarizing:

I invite you to look over this consolidated list to refresh your memory of those Congregational Activity areas and Creation Care Ideas that most sparked your enthusiasm over the past sessions. We’re now each going to choose three “Creation Care Ideas” that most appeal to us. Specifically, I’m going to ask you to put a check mark or sticker [depending on which one you have distributed] next to the ideas that, in your opinion, best matches each of the following criteria:
1. Would be most enjoyable.
2. Would make best use of our gifts—personal and/or shared.
3. Would most effectively integrate creation care and justice into our congregation’s life.

Then facilitate three “rounds of voting”—each round corresponding to each criterion. For each round: (1) read each criterion again and (2) invite participants to come forward to place one check mark/sticker next to the Creation Care Idea area that best corresponds with the criterion. Please note that people may choose to put their checkmarks/stickers on three different areas or they may choose one area that, for them, meets two or even all three criteria. The number of checkmarks/stickers will identify visually those areas for which, as a group, there seems to be the most energy.

Part 2: Putting congregational priorities into action
Read and/or summarize the following:

Earlier, we reflected on the question, “How shall we continue to cultivate our shared calling to ‘steward the mysteries of God?’” And, our scripture passages offered us fruitful images for staying strongly rooted in our faith and in our calling. Rooted in our faith in God who is “renewing the face of the earth” (Ps. 104:30), our congregation can be like a well-watered tree that produces fruits and leaves for the healing of God’s world, for years to come.

We can participate in this healing work in our personal lives and, again, within the life of our congregation. Some of us may feel particularly called to continue to come together and help bring our prioritized Creation Care Ideas to life. For those who do feel called to this, please note that our handout for today has excellent resources—used and developed by other congregations. So we won't have to start this work from scratch. Who would like to continue to meet—maybe on a monthly or bi-monthly basis—to help bring these priorities to life?

Take a few minutes to let people respond. Pass around the sign up sheet for all who want to continue to meet. Be sure that at least one or two people have committed to help convene the group. Then enter into the closing ritual.

Closing Ritual
Ask participants to stand, divide into two groups, and refer to their handouts.

1Feel free to increase this number if you’d like—e.g., you may decide that each person can have three choices per “round.”
SESSION FOUR: Open to God’s Renewing Work
Participants Handout

STEPs FOR BRINGING YOUR CREATION-CARE PRIORITIES TO LIFE

1. The creation care group convenes. On a regular basis, your group may want to use portions of the God’s Earth Is Sacred letter (e.g., the “Call to Action”) and/or some of the worship materials in Appendix as “touchstones” to help remind you of why you’re coming together.

2. Look at the list of identified priorities from Session Four.

3. Create basic annual plans for bringing each priority to life. Plans for each priority area can include:
   a. A brief description of the priority area.
   b. A list of specific tasks, related to the priority, for the coming year. Tasks may include details like:
      • With whom will we need to meet to bring this priority to life?
      • What information will we need and how will we obtain it?
      • What resources will we need and how will we obtain them?
   c. Commitments from group participants to follow through on tasks.
   d. A rough timeline that corresponds with the tasks. Timelines should also include any future meeting dates for your group.

4. At the end of the year outlined in the annual plans, be sure to celebrate your accomplishments—as a group and/or with the entire congregation (e.g., during a special worship service or annual meeting). Doing so will help to give you a sense of accomplishment and an opportunity to thank God and one another.

5. Continue this process annually. The creation care group reconvenes to determine ongoing and/or new congregational priorities (using a process similar to that in Session Four) for the coming year. Then the group begins annual planning for the next year.

Closing Ritual
Litany of Commitment
(Portions adapted from text in the introductory section of God’s Earth Is Sacred.)

Group 1: By God’s grace, all things are made new!
All: We share in God’s renewing work.

Group 2: We cling to God’s trustworthy promise to restore and fulfill all that God creates.
All: We share in God’s renewing work.

Group 1: We walk, with God’s help, a new path—a path different from our present course.
All: We share in God’s renewing work.

Group 2: We pray a special blessing over our personal commitments to participate in God’s renewing work. May the Holy Spirit strengthen each of us to joyfully and courageously live into our calling as “stewards of the mysteries of God.”
All: We share in God’s renewing work.

Group 1: We pray a special blessing over those among us who are called to continue to come together and help bring our group’s hopes to life. May the Holy Spirit bring you vision, strength, and joy.
All: We pursue a new journey together, with courage and joy; to share in God’s renewing work!

1This process was inspired by material from Earth Ministry’s Greening Congregations Hand book, pp. 31-36.
Doxology
(Sung to the tune of the traditional doxology known as “Old Hundredth,” which begins “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow…”)

Praise God Creator of all things,
For Your glory creation sings.
We praise You with hearts, minds, and hands
Restoring waters, air, and lands.
A-men.

Resources for the Ongoing Creation Care Group
• National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Programs: www.ncccecojustice.org
• Web of Creation’s Green Congregation pages: www.webofcreation.org

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.
Call to Worship
(Adapted from the “Call to Action” section of God’s Earth Is Sacred.)
Leader: Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us join together as one loving expression of the Creator, Sustainer, and Restorer of all creation.
All: Come, let us worship God with the fullness of our lives!

Leader: Brothers and sisters, may our worship help us to become living reflections of the true Gospel: “for God so love the cosmos.”
All: Come, let us worship God with the fullness of our lives!

Opening Prayer
(Quoted portions taken directly from the “Ecological Affirmations of Faith” section of God’s Earth Is Sacred; to be read by three groups.)

Leader: Creator, Sustainer, and Restorer of all creation,
“We stand [before You,] with awe and gratitude, as members of Your bountiful and good creation.”
“We rejoice in the splendor and mystery of countless species, our common creaturehood, and the interdependence of all that You make.”
We praise You for revealing glimpses of Your glory and grace through the “windows” of Your creation.
With awe and gratitude, joy and praise, we open our full lives to You.
In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Ecological Laments and Affirmations
(Quoted portions taken directly from the “Ecological Affirmations of Faith” section of God’s Earth Is Sacred; to be read by three groups.)

Leader: As people of one loving and listening God, let us join together to express our beliefs, sorrows, and hopes:

Group 1: “We believe that the Earth is home for all and that it has been created intrinsically good.”

Group 2: “We lament that the human species is shattering the splendid gifts of this web of life, ignoring our responsibility for the well being of all life, while destroying species and their habitats at a rate never before known in human history.”

Group 3: “We believe that the Holy Spirit, who animates all of creation, breathes in us and can empower us to participate in working toward the flourishing of Earth’s community of life. We believe that the people of God are called to forge ways of being human within creation that enable socially just and ecologically sustainable communities to flourish for generations to come. And we believe in God’s promise to fulfill all of creation, anticipating the reconciliation of all, in accordance with God’s promise.”

---

1 John 3:16.
2 Genesis 1
3 Colossians 3:11.
4 2 Peter 3:13,4
Group 1: “We lament that we have rejected this vocation, and have distorted our God-given abilities and knowledge in order to ransack and often destroy ecosystems and human communities rather than to protect, strengthen, and nourish them.”

Group 2: “We believe that, in boundless love that hungers for justice, God in Jesus Christ acts to restore and redeem all creation …God incarnate affirms all creation,⁵ which becomes a sacred window to eternity. In the cross and resurrection we know that God is drawn to life’s most brutal and broken places and there brings forth healing and liberating power. That saving action restores right relationships among all members of the whole creation.”⁶

Group 3: “We confess that instead of living into and proclaiming this salvation through our very lives and worship, we have abused and exploited the rest of creation, and have perpetuated injustice of many kinds [neglecting and harming] …vast numbers of people on the margins of power and privilege, altering climates, extinguishing species, and jeopardizing Earth’s capacity to sustain life as we know and love it.”

Group 1: “We believe that the created world is sacred—a revelation of God’s saving power and gracious presence filling all things.”

Group 2: “…We cling to God’s trustworthy promise to restore, renew, and fulfill all that God creates.”

Group 3: “We long and work toward the day when churches, as embodiments of Christ on Earth, will respond to the ‘groaning of creation’⁷ and to God’s passionate desire to ‘renew the face of the Earth.’⁸

All: “We look forward to the day when the lamentations and groans will be over, justice with peace will reign, humankind will nurture not betray the rest of creation, and all of creation will sing for joy!”

Litany for the Liberation of God’s Creation
(Quoted portions taken directly from the introductory section of God’s Earth Is Sacred.)

Leader: For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God …creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.⁹

All: God’s creation will be set free from its bondage.

Leader: But today, “God’s creation delivers unsettling news: Earth’s climate is warming to dangerous levels.”

All: God’s creation will be set free from its bondage.

Leader: “90 percent of the world’s fisheries have been depleted.”

All: God’s creation will be set free from its bondage.

Leader: “Coastal development and pollution are causing a sharp decline in ocean health.”

All: God’s creation will be set free from its bondage.

Leader: “Shrinking habitat threatens to extinguish thousands of species.”

All: God’s creation will be set free from its bondage.

Leader: “Over 9 percent of the United States’ forests have been lost.”

All: God’s creation will be set free from its bondage.

Leader: “Almost half of the population of the United States lives in areas that do not meet national air quality standards.”

All: God’s creation will be set free from its bondage.

⁵ John 1:14.
⁶ Mark 16:15.
⁷ Romans 8:22.
⁸ Psalm 104:30
⁹ Romans 8:19-21
Leader: We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, for redemption …

All: O God, You set all captives free,
Awaken our senses so that we might know creation's groanings, beauty, and longings.
Enliven our wills so that we might hunger to work with You for the liberation of Your whole creation.
In Jesus' Name we pray, Amen.

A Prayer in the Spirit of St. Francis of Assisi
(The first portion of this classic prayer is adapted from “Guiding Norms for Churches in Society” section of God’s Earth Is Sacred.)

All: Lord, make us instruments of Your peace:
Where there is poverty and ecological brokenness, let us help to restore creation's integrity.
Where there is disregard for present and future generations of life, let us proclaim Your everlasting covenant with every living creature.
Where there is carelessness for Your beloved creation, let us inspire respect.
Where there is arrogance, humility.
Where there is greed, generosity.
Where there is wastefulness, caring frugality.
Where there are false divisions, solidarity.
Where there is indifference to suffering, compassion.
Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in the pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

Litany of Commitment
(Adapted from text in the introductory section of God’s Earth Is Sacred.)

Leader: By God’s grace, all things are made new!
All: We share in God’s renewing work.

Leader: We cling to God’s trustworthy promise to restore and fulfill all that God creates.
All: We share in God’s renewing work.

Leader: We walk, with God’s help, a new path—a path different from our present course.
All: We pursue a new journey together, with courage and joy: to share in God’s renewing work!

Sermon Resources
Sample Sermon
On Earth Day Sunday in 2005 the Reverend Dean Snyder preached the sermon from which the following excerpts were taken. He offered these words at his church, Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C. His sermon was strongly influenced by the God’s Earth Is Sacred statement. For the complete sermon, please go to www.foundryumc.org/sermons/4_17_2005.htm.

---

10 Romans 8:22-23.
11 Genesis 9:8-17.
These past few weeks I have been meditating on the NCC statement “God’s Earth Is Sacred.” The statement begins with a brief reminder of some of the most unsettling ways that humanity has damaged the earth: “Earth’s climate is warming to dangerous levels; 90 percent of the world’s fisheries have been depleted; coastal development and pollution are causing a sharp decline in ocean health; shrinking habitat threatens to extinguish thousands of species; over 95 percent of the contiguous United States forests have been lost; and almost half of the population in the United States lives in areas that do not meet national air quality standards.”

The list, of course, could go on and on.

As I have read, reread, and prayed over the statement, I have encountered an idea that has touched and troubled me: [The scholars] suggest that the damage we have done and still do to the earth is a consequence of bad theology. In fact, they call it a “false gospel.” This is what they have written: “We have listened to a false gospel that we continue to live out in our daily habits—a gospel that proclaims that God cares for the salvation of humans only and that our human calling is to exploit Earth for our own ends alone.” I have to confess that I am pretty much guilty as charged.

My theological thinking has assumed that human beings were the point of God’s creation: everything else led up to us; everything else found its fulfillment in us; the rest of creation had meaning because of us, and only because of us. I was taught this by the way biblical creation stories were told to me as a child and by most of the theology I read as an adult. Creation exists for the purpose of that part of it which is conscious and self-aware—human beings. I remember seminary discussions in which consciousness and self-awareness were equated with the image Deo, the image of God presumably to be found on earth uniquely in human-kind…. I have always assumed that God’s true and real relationship was with humanity and that the rest of creation was merely the stage on which the drama of the divine-human encounter played out. What if God has a loving relationship with the endangered Siberian tiger, of which there are only 400 left, and the graceful and beautiful whooping crane, of which there are only 250 adult birds left?

The Great Commission found that the longer ending of the Gospel of Mark was mistranslated for years, because translators couldn’t believe it meant what it says. In Mark 16:15, the Risen Jesus says to the eleven disciples: “Go into all the cosmos and proclaim the good news to the whole kisis.” For many years this was translated: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” (KJV) Even a newer translation says: “Go and preach the gospel to everyone in the world.” (CEV) But the New Revised Standard Version has it right. The Greek word kisis means “creation”—everything that is and the whole process of it coming to be. The Risen Jesus says, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.” (NRSV)

The way we see and perceive may be the most important thing. If we see creation as raw material, we may end up being un-Creators—builders of towers of Babel. But if—through prayer and communion—we can learn to see creation … as God’s beloved, then we can learn to live in peace with creation, perhaps to fly with the birds and to swim with the sunfishes and to dance with the stars.

Possible Hymns
(With composer or arranger and tune title [in italics])

- All Creatures of our God and King (St. Francis of Assisi/Lasst uns erfreuen)
- Creating God, Your Fingers Trace (Rawthorn/Wilderness)
- For the Beauty of the Earth (Pierpoint, Monk/Lucerna Laudoniae)
- For the Healing of the Nations (Kaan, Wade)
- God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale (Vajda)
- God Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens (Cameron/Holy Manna)
- God Who Touchest Earth with Beauty (Edgar/Spiritus Christi)
- Let All Things Now Living (Davis/The Ash Grove)
- Touch the Earth Lightly (Murray, Gibson)
Group-Building Guidelines

For creating an open, community-enhancing group during the series, we suggest the following guidelines:

- **View everyone as a participant (there are no leaders).** While one person will help to facilitate each session’s flow, neither this person nor anyone else should view him/herself as the session’s “leader.” Each of us has a unique voice that can help to reveal unforeseen wisdom. We can create an environment of respect and mindfulness in which every person’s voice can shine forth.

- **Respond as equals.** As we all bear the image of our God who loves us equally, we can commit to valuing each other as equals and we can ensure that our responses to one another reflect this commitment.

- **Be authentic.** In our day-to-day lives, we often wear many masks. This group time is a blessed opportunity, in the company of our Christian sisters and brothers, to be more fully the people God is creating us to be.

- **Bring our whole selves to the conversation.** While our intellectual gifts are very valuable, we can use this opportunity to bring our emotions, spiritual and experiential insights, and imaginations to the conversation as well.

- **View conversations as barn-raising instead of battle-making.** Consider the following as we strive to create a collaborative environment:
  - Really listen to others—avoid becoming distracted and the temptation to formulate a response as someone is speaking.
  - Respond with support—avoid the highly destructive temptation to attack, dismiss, or denigrate others.
  - State what you mean without persuasion—enjoy the freedom that comes from not having to prove that you’re right.
  - Remember to use your own voice, don’t play devil’s advocate—the latter erodes authenticity and trust.

- **Question conventional ideas and seek alternative explanations and views.** Because human communities and all of God’s creation groan under the weighty implications of traditional worldviews, this is a time to bring critical, biblical thought to these views.

- **Discover wisdom through stories.** Jesus’ parables offer some of the greatest kernels of wisdom in our faith. What are your life parables and what may God be trying to say through them? When we share our life stories, we open ourselves to one another as holy, living texts.

---

Suggestions for Retreats

Using these materials in a retreat setting can be very meaningful. Here are some suggestions for making simple modifications to these materials for retreats:

- Allow for significant breaks of time between sessions—preferably ones that would allow participants time to be outside (e.g., taking a group walk, participating in a hands-on restoration project). For example, your group may want to engage in Session One in the morning, take a hike in early afternoon, then engage in Session Two in the later afternoon.

- Make sure that your group has all of the materials (e.g., photocopied handouts) needed for every session, prior to Session One.

- In preparation for Session Two:
  1. Because participants will be asked to read materials from www.greenfacts.org/ecosystems/index.htm, please consider (a) making arrangements with your retreat location (if it has Internet access) for participants to explore this web site, (b) download or purchase a copy of the United Nations Millennium Ecosystems Assessment (http://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/products.aspx) or, (c) making at least two hardcopies of the materials from the GreenFacts web page.

  2. Please bring a variety of current magazines and newspapers from which participants can clip items.

- During Session Two, participants will write a Haiku poem and ask themselves the question: What one thing can I do this week to help make the ‘redemption’ I expressed in my poem come to life?” Modify the question (e.g., “What one thing can I do after this retreat…”); then prior to the Closing Ritual in Session Four, ask them to take out this poem and reflect on it once again.
God’s Earth is Sacred:  
An Open Letter to Church and Society in the United States

God’s creation delivers unsettling news. Earth’s climate is warming to dangerous levels; 90 percent of the world’s fisheries have been depleted; coastal development and pollution are causing a sharp decline in ocean health; shrinking habitat threatens to extinguish thousands of species; over 95 percent of the contiguous United States forests have been lost; and almost half of the population in the United States lives in areas that do not meet national air quality standards. In recent years, the profound danger has grown, requiring us as theologians, pastors, and religious leaders to speak out and act with new urgency.

We are obliged to relate to Earth as God’s creation “in ways that sustain life on the planet, provide for the [basic] needs of all humankind, and increase justice.” Over the past several decades, slowly but faithfully, the religious community in the United States has attempted to address issues of ecology and justice. Our faith groups have offered rich theological perspectives, considered moral issues through the lens of long-standing social teaching, and passed numerous policies within our own church bodies. While we honor the efforts in our churches, we have clearly failed to communicate the full measure and magnitude of Earth’s environmental crisis—religiously, morally, or politically. It is painfully clear from the verifiable testimony of the world’s scientists that our response has been inadequate to the scale and pace of Earth’s degradation.

To continue to walk the current path of ecological destruction is not only folly, it is sin. As voiced by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who has taken the lead among senior religious leaders in his concern for creation: “To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation; . . . for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands . . . for humans to injure other humans with disease . . . for humans to contaminate the Earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life, with poisonous substances . . . these are sins.” We have become im-Creators. Earth is in jeopardy at our hands.

This means that ours is a theological crisis as well. We have listened to a false gospel that we continue to live out in our daily habits—a gospel that proclaims that God cares for the salvation of humans only and that our human calling is to exploit Earth for our own ends alone. This false gospel still finds its proud preachers and continues to capture its adherents among emboldened political leaders and policy makers.

The secular counterpart of this gospel rests in the conviction that humans can master the Earth. Our modern way of life assumes this mastery. However, the sobering truth is that we hardly have knowledge of, much less control over, the deep and long-term consequences of our human impacts upon the Earth. We have already sown the seeds for many of those consequences. The fruit of those seeds will be reaped by future generations of human beings, together with others in the community of life.
The imperative first step is to repent of our sins, in the presence of God and one another. This repentance of our social and ecological sins will acknowledge the special responsibility that falls to those of us who are citizens of the United States. Though only five percent of the planet’s human population, we produce one-quarter of the world’s carbon emissions, consume a quarter of its natural riches, and perpetuate scandalous inequities at home and abroad. We are a precious part of Earth’s web of life, but we do not own the planet and we cannot transcend its requirements for regeneration on its own terms. We have not listened well to the Maker of Heaven and Earth.

The second step is to pursue a new journey together, with courage and joy. By God’s grace, all things are made new. We can share in that renewal by clinging to God’s trustworthy promise to restore and fulfill all that God creates and by walking, with God’s help, a path different from our present course. To that end, we affirm our faith, propose a set of guiding norms, and call on our churches to rededicate themselves to this mission. We firmly believe that addressing the degradation of God’s sacred Earth is the moral assignment of our time comparable to the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s, the worldwide movement to achieve equality for women, or ongoing efforts to control weapons of mass destruction in a post-Hiroshima world.

Ecological Affirmations of Faith

We stand with awe and gratitude as members of God’s bountiful and good creation. We rejoice in the splendor and mystery of countless species, our common creaturehood, and the interdependence of all that God makes. We believe that the Earth is home for all and that it has been created intrinsically good (Genesis 1).

We lament that the human species is shattering the splendid gifts of this web of life, ignoring our responsibility for the well being of all life, while destroying species and their habitats at a rate never before known in human history.

We believe that the Holy Spirit, who animates all of creation, breathes in us and can empower us to participate in working toward the flourishing of Earth’s community of life. We believe that the people of God are called to forge ways of being human that enable socially just and ecologically sustainable communities to flourish for generations to come. And we believe in God’s promise to fulfill all of creation, anticipating the reconciliation of all (Colossians 1:15), in accordance with God’s promise (II Peter 3:13).

We lament that we have rejected this vocation, and have distorted our God-given abilities and knowledge in order to ransack and often destroy ecosystems and human communities rather than to protect, strengthen, and nourish them.

We believe that, in boundless love that hunger for justice, God in Jesus Christ acts to restore and redeem all creation (including human beings). God incarnate affirms all creation (John 1:14), which becomes a sacred window to eternity. In the cross and resurrection we know that God is drawn into life’s most brutal and broken places and there brings forth healing and liberating power. That saving action restores right relationships among all members of “the whole creation” (Mark 16:15).

We confess that instead of living and proclaiming this salvation through our very lives and worship, we have abused and exploited the Earth and people on the margins of power and privilege, altering climates,
extinguishing species, and jeopardizing Earth's capacity to sustain life as we know and love it.

We believe that the created world is sacred—a revelation of God's power and gracious presence filling all things. This sacred quality of creation demands moderation and sharing, urgent antidotes for our excess in consumption and waste, reminding us that economic justice is an essential condition of ecological integrity. We cling to God's trustworthy promise to restore, renew, and fulfill all that God creates. We long for and work toward the day when churches, as embodiments of Christ on Earth, will respond to the "groaning of creation" (Romans 8:22) and to God's passionate desire to "renew the face of the Earth" (Psalm 104:30). We look forward to the day when the lamentations and groans of creation will be over, justice with peace will reign, humankind will nurture not betray the Earth, and all of creation will sing for joy.

Guiding Norms for Church and Society

These affirmations imply a challenge that is also a calling: to fulfill our vocation as moral images of God, reflections of divine love and justice charged to "serve and preserve" the Garden (Genesis 2:15). Given this charge and the urgent problems of our age—from species extinctions and mass poverty to climate change and health-crippling pollution—how shall we respond? What shall we be and do? What are the standards and practices of moral excellence that we ought to cultivate in our personal lives, our communities of faith, our social organizations, our businesses, and our political institutions? We affirm the following norms of social and environmental responsibility:

**Justice**—creating right relationships, both social and ecological, to ensure for all members of the Earth community the conditions required for their flourishing. Among human members, justice demands meeting the essential material needs and conditions for human dignity and social participation. In our global context, economic deprivation and ecological degradation are linked in a vicious cycle. We are compelled, therefore, to seek eco-justice, the integration of social justice and ecological integrity. The quest for eco-justice also implies the development of a set of human environmental rights, since one of the essential conditions of human well being is ecological integrity. These moral entitlements include protection of soils, air, and water from diverse pollutants; the preservation of biodiversity; and governmental actions ensuring the fair and frugal use of creation’s riches.

**Sustainability**—living within the bounds of planetary capacities indefinitely, in fairness to both present and future generations of life. God's covenant is with humanity and all other living creatures "for all future generations" (Genesis 9:8-17). The concern for sustainability forces us to be responsible for the truly long-term impacts of our lifestyles and policies.

**Bioresponsibility**—extending the covenant of justice to include all other life forms as beloved creatures of God and as expressions of God's presence, wisdom, power, and glory. We do not determine nor declare creation's value, and other creatures should not be treated merely as instruments for our needs and wants. Other species have their own integrity. They deserve a "fair share" of Earth's bounty—a share that allows a biodiversity of life to thrive along with human communities.

**Humility**—recognizing, as an antidote to arrogance, the limits of human knowledge, technological ingenuity, and moral character. We are not the masters of creation. Knowing human capacities for error and evil, humility keeps our own species in check for the good of the whole of Earth as God's creation.
Generosity — sharing Earth’s riches to promote and defend the common good in recognition of God’s purposes for the whole creation and Christ’s gift of abundant life. Humans are not collections of isolated individuals, but rather communities of socially and ecologically interdependent beings. A measure of a good society is not whether it privileges those who already have much, but rather whether it privileges the most vulnerable members of creation. Essentially, these tasks require good government at all levels, from local to regional to national to international.

Frugality — restraining economic production and consumption for the sake of eco-justice. Living lives filled with God’s Spirit liberates us from the illusion of finding wholeness in the accumulation of material things and brings us to the reality of God’s just purposes. Frugality connotes moderation, sufficiency, and temperance. Many call it simplicity. It demands the careful conservation of Earth’s riches, comprehensive recycling, minimal harm to other species, material efficiency and the elimination of waste, and product durability. Frugality is the corrective to a cardinal vice of the age: prodigality — excessively taking from and wasting God’s creation. On a finite planet, frugality is an expression of love and an instrument for justice and sustainability: it enables all life to thrive together by sparing and sharing global goods.

Solidarity — acknowledging that we are increasingly bound together as a global community in which we bear responsibility for one another’s well being. The social and environmental problems of the age must be addressed with cooperative action at all levels — local, regional, national and international. Solidarity is a commitment to the global common good through international cooperation.

Compassion — sharing the joys and sufferings of all Earth’s members and making them our own. Members of the body of Christ see the face of Christ in the vulnerable and excluded. From compassion flows inclusive caring and careful service to meet the needs of others.

A Call to Action: Healing the Earth and Providing a Just and Sustainable Society
For too long, we, our Christian brothers and sisters, and many people of good will have relegated care and justice for the Earth to the periphery of our concerns. This is not a competing “program alternative,” one “issue” among many. In this most critical moment in Earth’s history, we are convinced that the central moral imperative of our time is the care for Earth as God’s creation.

Churches, as communities of God’s people in the world, are called to exist as representatives of the loving Creator, Sustainer, and Restorer of all creation. We are called to worship God with all our being and actions, and to treat creation as sacred. We must engage our political leaders in supporting the very future of this planet. We are called to cling to the true Gospel — for “God so loved the cosmos” (John 3:16) — rejecting the false gospels of our day.

We believe that caring for creation must undergird, and be entwined with, all other dimensions of our churches’ ministries. We are convinced that it is no longer acceptable to claim to be “church” while continuing to perpetuate, or even permit, the abuse of Earth as God’s creation. Nor is it acceptable for our corporate and political leaders to engage in “business as usual” as if the very future of life-support systems were not at stake.

Therefore, we urgently call on our brothers and sisters in Christ, and all people of good will, to join us in:

Understanding our responsibilities as those who live within the United States of America — the part of the human family that represents five percent of the world population and consumes 25 percent of Earth’s
riches. We believe that one of the surest ways to gain this understanding is by listening intently to the most vulnerable: those who most immediately suffer the consequences of our overconsumption, toxification, and hubris. The whole Earth is groaning, crying out for healing—let us awaken the "ears of our souls" to hear it, before it's too late.

**Integrating** this understanding into our core beliefs and practices surrounding what it means to be "church," to be "human," to be "children of God." Such integration will be readily apparent in: congregational mission statements, lay and ordained ministries, the preaching of the Word, our hymns of praise, the confession of our sins, our financial stewardship and offerings to God, theological education, our evangelism, our daily work, sanctuary use, and compassionate service to all communities of life. With this integrated witness we look forward to a revitalization of our human vocation and our churches' lives that parallels the revitalization of God's thriving Earth.

**Advocating** boldly with all our leaders on behalf of creation's most vulnerable members (including human members). We must shed our complacency, denial, and fears and speak God's truth to power, on behalf of all who have been denied dignity and for the sake of all voiceless members of the community of life.

In Christ’s name and for Christ’s glory, we call out with broken yet hopeful hearts: join us in restoring God’s Earth—the greatest healing work and moral assignment of our time.

Signed.

**Drafters**

Neddy Astudillo, Latina Eco-Theologian, Presbyterian Church USA

Father John Chryssavgis, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

Dr. Dieter Hessel, Director of the Ecumenical Program on Ecology, Justice, and Faith

Bishop Thomas L. Hoyt, Jr., President, National Council of Churches and Bishop of Louisiana and Mississippi, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church

Dr. Carol Johnston, Associate Professor of Theology and Culture and Director of Lifelong Theological Education at Christian Theological Seminary

Tanya Marcova-Barnett, Earth Ministry, Program Director

Bill McKibben, author and scholar-in-residence, Middlebury College

Dr. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Assistant Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at Seattle University

Dr. James A. Nash, social and ecological ethicist, retired

Dr. Larry Rasmussen, Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics, Union Theological Seminary, New York City

Rev. Dr. H. Paul Santmire, Author and Teaching Theologian, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Co-signers
Dr. Karen Baker-Fletcher, Associate Professor of Theology, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University
Dr. John B. Cobb, Jr., Emeritus Professor, Claremont School of Theology and Claremont Graduate School
Dr. Jay McDaniel, Director of the Steel Center for the Study of Religion and Philosophy, Hendrix College
Dr. Sallie McFague, Carpenter Professor of Theology Emerita, Vanderbilt University Divinity School Distinguished Theologian in Residence, Vancouver School of Theology, British Columbia
Dr. Donald E. Miller, Emeritus Professor of Christian Education and Ethics, Bethany Theological Seminary, Richmond, Indiana
Dr. Barbara R. Rossing, New Testament Professor, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago


2 "Address of His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew at the Environmental Symposium, Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, Santa Barbara, California, 8 November 1997." John Chryssavgis, Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003, pages 220-221.

The Theological Statement on the Environment was drafted in September 2004 at the College of Preachers and finalized February 2005. For information on how you, your congregation, faith group, judicatory, or denomination can affirm this statement visit www.riccecojustice.org or contact Cassandra Carmichael, eco-justice program director, National Council of Churches, 110 Maryland Avenue, NE, Suite 108, Washington, DC 20002; 202-544-2350 ext. 27; or cassandra@toad.net.