

Awakening to
God's call to
Earthkeeping

*For creation waits
with eager longing
for the revealing
of the children of God.*

Romans 8:19

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**A four-session small group study
to encourage, empower, and
equip Lutherans in their calling
to care for creation.**

Caring for creation is an essential component of religious faith and witness. Faithful “earthkeeping” can deepen our relationship both with God and with one another, as we work for the healing of the world.

This resource is downloadable at no cost from the ELCA website at www.elca.org/stewardship/teaching. For more specific information about earthkeeping and using this resource, you may contact the author, and ELCA Diaconal Minister, Kim Winchell, at KWinchellDM@aol.com.

by Kim Winchell

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**Though this study guide has been designed with ELCA Lutherans in mind, members of other denominations can easily modify it for their own use, by incorporating pertinent materials from their own faith traditions and national church offices.

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Living in God's amazing grace

Introduction

Leader Guide

Earthkeeping is a term being used by many people of faith to describe the nature of our responsibility to care for creation. It springs from our wonder, awe, and gratitude for God's wisdom, creativity, and blessings that fill the natural world. It also grows out of our dismay and concern for the degradations and "groaning" of God's good creation.

Faithful earthkeeping involves extending the justice, peace, reconciliation, hope, and love of Christ to all creation. In caring for the Earth, we also deepen our relationship with God and with one another, making our faith more alive and relevant, in and to a broken world.

This study guide has been developed to help group participants hear and respond to God's call to earthkeeping, as a way to grow in their faith and to work for the healing of the world, both individually and in congregations.

Possible Uses and Contexts

This resource is intended for use in any faith-based small group setting, such as: adult/older youth Sunday school or Christian education classes, Women's circles, Men's groups, or a congregational "creation care" team. The material may be presented over four, approximately one-hour sessions, but suggestions and options are included for extending the study, where feasible or desired. It could also be utilized over a weekend in a retreat setting. This curriculum is merely an introductory overview, and groups are encouraged to make use of the additional resources listed in the Appendix, so that earthkeeping might become more fully integrated into the ongoing awareness, life, and practices of our family of faith.

Thank you, and blessings be upon you, for your leading of this group study about answering God's call to care for the Earth! This study booklet is arranged for use by the group leader, with separate, reproducible participant pages for each session.

Desired Outcomes

It is hoped that participants will:

- Gain a deeper awareness and understanding of our connection to creation and discover new ways to live into God's hope and guidance for our lives and world.
- Awaken to the Spirit's urgent call in our time, to better care for the Earth, in ways that are just and sustainable for all.
- Embrace a hopeful vision for how we, and the generations that follow us, can live in a world marked by a loving, healthy, life-giving relationship between humankind and the rest of God's creation.
- Be empowered and equipped to find ways to bring that vision to life, both in our personal lives and through a congregational witness to the wider society.

Leader Tips and Advance Preparation:

- Read through and familiarize yourself with the whole study booklet ahead of time, taking note of placement of materials, any advance prep needed for each session, and potential options for expanding the sessions.
- Order, or borrow, and preview any videos (from the Resource list) that may be used.
- Provide notice of this study group opportunity in your congregational newsletter or via other means available to you for promoting and advertising it.
- Post a sign-up sheet ahead of time to aid in determining how many participants to plan for and how many copies of participant pages to prepare. Please use recycled content papers!
- Consider “decorating” the meeting space to be used with a small collection of natural objects, photos, or posters depicting natural scenes (participants may also be invited to add to this collection).
- Make sure your meeting space has sufficient, comfortable seating and tables, if needed (though, if possible, consider holding your discussions outside!).
- Access to a white board or paper flip chart would be helpful.
- Be aware of nearby nature centers, planetariums, and any local or state environmental groups (as potential places to visit or for info on current local issues).
- The national ELCA office for public policy, The Washington Office, (www.elca.org/advocacy)



PHOTO © KIM WINCHELL

or a state ELCA public policy office will also be a helpful resource, in terms of issues.

- You may also wish to review, and perhaps obtain for group members, a copy of the ELCA’s social statement *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice*—see www.elca.org/socialstatements/environment.
- Each session has suggested prayers for the Opening and Closing/Sending, but feel free to create your own prayers, if desired, and to have group members share in the leading of prayers and readings. Potential discussion questions will be included for each session.

- **[Important!]** The leader, and participants, should collect (both prior to the class and throughout) any newspaper and magazine articles about current environmental issues or problems, and post or display them in some manner in the meeting room (this will be important in leading up to, and preparing for, Session Four).
- Finally, have fun with this! Be open to the leading of the Spirit. This should be a journey of joy, discovery, and hope for all involved. Encourage and allow all to have a chance to be heard, and strive to have discussions that are courteous and respectful, accepting that sometimes we may have to agree to disagree.

Awakening to
God's call to
Earthkeeping

Session One

Rediscovering Our Place in Creation

1

*When I look at your
heavens, the work of
your fingers, the moon
and the stars that you
have established,
what are human
beings that you are
mindful of them,
mortals that you care
for them? [Yet] ...you
have given them
dominion over the
works of your hands.
Psalm 8:3-4, 6a*

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Rediscovering Our Place in Creation Leader Guide



Leader Tips and Advance Preparation

- Make sufficient copies of the **Survey on Religious Faith & the Environment** (*Appendix, page 45*) if you choose to use that component in Session One and later return it for participant review and reflection in Session Four. Alternately, the survey can be distributed and collected prior to the first class, and reviewed confidentially ahead of time. Whichever way the survey is used, the idea is to gain a sense of the starting point attitudes of the group. Plan to have participants write their name or initials on the backside of the survey, after it is folded in half to turn in. Be sure to save these, as they will be revisited in the last session.
- If possible before the first session, provide participants with a copy of the **Theology for Earthkeeping** (*Appendix, page 43; please use a double-sided copy*) and request that they read it prior to your first gathering. Other options: it may be read aloud by either the leader or participants at some point during the beginning of the session (depending on the time available), or distributed at the end of the session, as a take-home reading.

Note: This study guide utilizes the common modern scientific understanding that the universe is approximately 13-14 billion years old, and the Earth about 5 billion years old. See pertinent videos, books, and the “Clergy Letter Project” in the Resources section for further information, if you think this will be of concern to any of your participants.

- You may wish to find some Hubble Telescope photos to have available or on display for this session (or schedule a follow-up visit to a local planetarium).
- Plan ahead for how you might convey the concepts of the Ancient Hebrew worldview and the scope of time, introduced in this session. Take a few moments to examine the illustration, an artist’s depiction of **“Ancient Hebrew Cosmology,”** as gleaned from the opening chapters of Genesis. This will be introduced in the section, **“Ways of Rediscovering Our Place.”** Explanatory text, provided below in the session outline, may be read aloud.
- The **“Appreciating Our Place in Time”** analogy: You may wish to sketch out a picture of the ten volumes, or plan to bring in an encyclopedia set, to help participants visualize this. There is also explanatory text that you will read for this illustration.

Opening the Session

Leader welcomes group participants and invites brief introductions, if needed (fuller introductions will follow opening prayer and opening readings).

A Call to Prayer

See page 10. This may be read in unison; leader may follow with a free-form prayer or invite participant petitions of hopes for the study group, or creation itself.

Distribution of the Survey (optional)

Ask participants to take just a couple of minutes to quietly fill it out, fold it in half, and put their name or initials on the backside before returning it to you.

You may wish to share some personal words about your hopes for this group study, and ask participants what their hopes are. Another option would be to share the list of “Desired Outcomes” from the introductory material.

You may then read the following questions—not to be answered, but to help set the theme and tone of this first session.

Questions to think about:

- What do we know about our “place” and how might that inform our “role” as humans, as God’s people, on Earth?

- How might ancient views, coupled with new understandings of our place in space and time, help us to rediscover our place within the “matrix of grace” that is our earthly home?
- How familiar are you with your bioregion and backyard’s ecological features?

Introductory Reflection

See page 10; invite one or two persons to read it aloud.

Allow a short time for discussion, if desired, of this Introduction or the Theology for Earthkeeping.

You may address the provided sample questions as a group, or have participants take a few minutes to privately write their thoughts in the space provided on their handout for this session.

Ways of Rediscovering Our Place

Leader facilitates this discussion, by reading or summarizing provided text.

How do we name our place?

Each person is asked to share where she or he was born, grew up, and where they live now. (An alternative “invitation” would be to borrow a conversation starter that the Australian Aborigines purportedly use when they meet a stranger. They ask two questions: “What waters do you come from?” and “Where is your bone country?”)

The ancient worldview and how far we have come

Leader may read the following or summarize in his/her own words.

This is what the known world seemed to be like, to ancient eyes: the Earth held up by pillars, with waters below, welling up in rivers, lakes, and oceans, with above the “firmament,” like a dome, that the sun and stars moved across, and with “floodgates” to let in the rain and snow. How far we have come in our understanding, of the nature of the universe, and where the Earth fits into it!

Finding our place in the universe

Leader slowly reads aloud the following “universe statistics.” Participants may wish to close their eyes, to listen in a more reflective manner.

The universe had been developing for some 8-10 billion years prior to Earth’s appearing.

The Earth was “born” nearly 5 billion years ago.

It is part of a solar system, that is itself part of the Milky Way galaxy; and our solar system is in what you might call the “backwaters”—an outer arm—of our spiral galaxy.

Our Milky Way galaxy contains about 300-400 billion stars, many similar to our Sun, with planetary bodies of their own.

Our home galaxy moves in relationship to a group of some 26 other galaxies, known as a “cluster;” ours is called the “Local Group.”

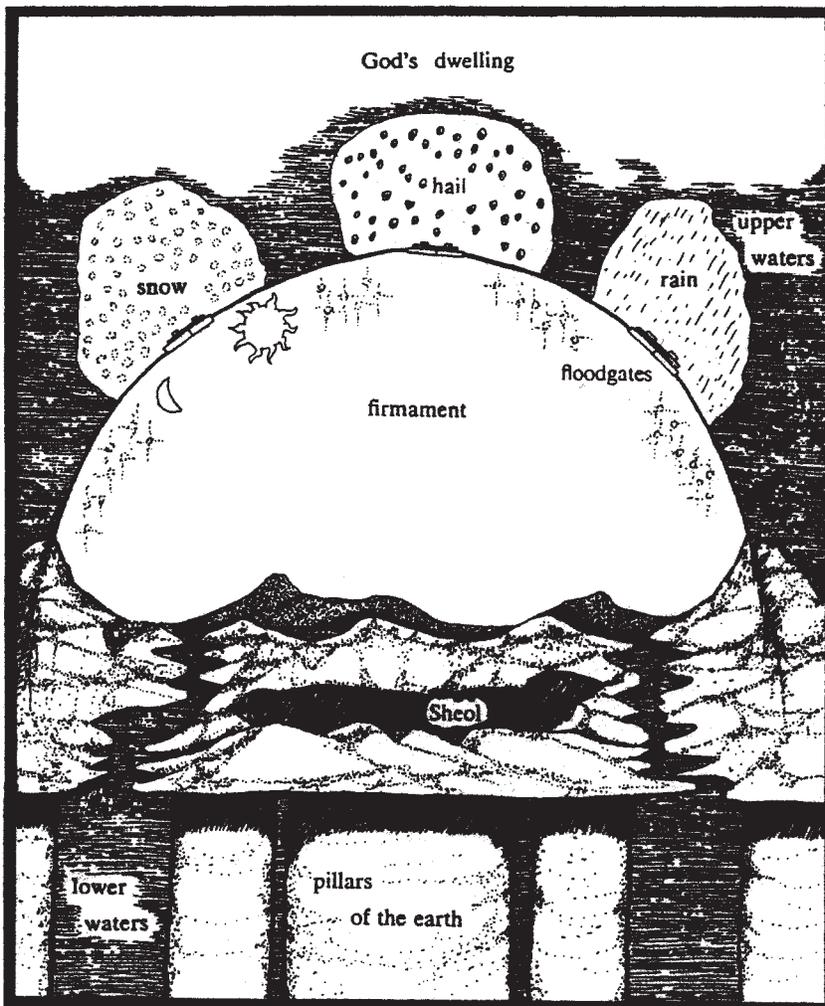


Illustration from *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* by Lawrence Boadt, Paulist Press, NY, 1984, page 115. Used by permission.

This so named Local Group cluster of galaxies is, itself, part of a group of over 1000 clusters, making up what is called the Virgo Supercluster.

Now try to imagine a single super-cluster as a white dot—remember that it contains hundreds, if not thousands, of galaxies, themselves containing billions of stars ...there are estimated to be something on the order of 10 million such “dots,” such superclusters, spread across the vast expanse of space.¹

[pause]

It's about more than our human minds can conceive of, isn't it? Does this sort of knowledge shake our faith, or fill us with awe and wonder, or a sense of humility and gratitude?

Hear these words of Scripture:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:18-19

Possible questions for reflection and discussion

Select one or more of the following questions for discussion by the whole group or break into smaller groups, if numbers warrant.

- When you consider our physical location within the universe, do you find it humbling? Frightening? Exciting? Other feelings?
- How does your consideration of the vastness, mystery, and wonder of our universe influence your sense of the immensity of God's love for us?
- Knowing what we do of the universe, does it increase or decrease the significance of humans? Does it, should it, affect how we relate to one another and the natural world around us? How we relate to God?

Brian Swimme, in his book, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*, uses a phrase to describe how he views the nature of the universe. He calls it the “all-nourishing abyss.”² On the other hand, the late Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler, in his 1954 essay, “A Theology for Earth,” describes creation (as viewed through the lens of Psalm 104) as “a matrix of grace in which all things derive significance from their origin, and all things find fulfillment in praise.”³ Which phrase feels most comfortable to you? Might “all-encompassing matrix of grace” be a good compromise that fits both scientific and theological understandings? Can you come up with other suitable ways of naming our context in the universe, that arise from our belief, through faith, that we are held in and by God's love, the grace of Christ, and the power of the Spirit?

Appreciating Our Place in Time

Leader reads this analogy and the commentary following.

Here's one way to try to grasp our place in time, in the history of the universe and the Earth.⁴ Begin by imagining a ten-volume encyclopedia set. This will represent the 5 billion-year history of Earth (which followed 8-10 billion years of the universe's development).

Each volume of Earth's history holds 500 pages; each page represents 1 million years.

In such an encyclopedia set, life—in the form of the first cellular life—does not appear until volume 8, with much of that volume devoted to plants, though reptiles reach their peak about page 440. Humans come along fairly late in this story ...page 499, of the last of the ten volumes! In this model (configured to stop at the year 2000), the time of organized human civilization (the past 6,000 years) is represented by **the final two words on the very last page.**

Time analogy commentary by Lutheran ethicist, theologian, and author Larry Rasmussen:

“The astonishing thing is the last syllable of the last word of the last volume. Here humans turned the great tide against life itself. Here the process of slowly closing down major life-systems began at human hands. ...It is astonishing that an organic world aeons in the making could be so easily jeopardized by the species that claims to master its secrets and care for it as a watchful steward. ...Alongside our miniscule tenure the thing most astonishing is our gargantuan imprint. These are the ten volumes of earth to date. We begin volume 11 as the twentieth century comes to an end.”⁵

The group may wish to share their thoughts and feelings raised by the readings on “place” in space and time. Or, the Leader may invite here a few moments of quiet reflection, for all to consider what God’s Spirit may be saying to us at this moment in our history and how we are called to be, and act, in our connection to one another and to God’s awesome creation around us.

Closing

A Commentary

by ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson (page 11)

Invite someone to read this aloud. Participants may then take a moment to quietly reflect upon and answer the “Question to ponder” or use it as a take-home exercise.

A Scripture Reading

Leader reads a paraphrase of Psalm 8:1, 3-6a.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the Earth!

When we look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, we cannot help but wonder:

what are human beings that you are even mindful of them, mortals that you so care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have placed us on this Earth and given us dominion over the work of your hands.

“Earth Ball”

by Olaf Skarsholt (page 11)

Read aloud, slowly, by one person.

After a pause for silent reflection, Leader closes with prayer:

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, you made the universe with all its marvelous order and beauty, its atoms, worlds, and galaxies, and the infinite complexity of living creatures. Gracious Lord, you are the artist of creation and the bearer of life; give us the wisdom and understanding to care for the Earth. Grant that as we see and experience all the blessings and mysteries of your creation, we may come to know you more truly, and more surely fulfill our role in your eternal purpose. In your holy name we pray, Amen.

Options for expanding Session One

- Visit a local planetarium or invite an astronomy professor or someone from a local astronomy club to make a presentation to the class or the congregation.
- Find some photos taken by the Hubble Telescope, share and discuss; a good book of amazing pictures from space, coupled with reflections, is *The Hand of God: Thoughts and Images Reflecting the Spirit of the Universe*, Templeton Foundation Press, 1999.
- Discuss materials from *The Clergy Letter Project* Web site: a February 2006 letter signed by over 10,000 clergy in the U.S., in support of the teaching of evolution, noting that religion and science do not have to be in an adversarial role (plus sermons and essays). www.uwosh.edu/colleges/cols/clergy_project.htm
- Show the videos, *The Blue Planet*, or *Keeping the Earth: Religious and Scientific Perspectives on the Environment* (see Resources).

- As a group, visit a local nature center, natural area, or wildlife refuge—get to know your bio-region! Conduct a prayer walk outdoors, and leave silent pauses for creation to join in and for personal reflection and prayer.
- Create a “get to know your bio-region quiz” about plant, animal species, natural features, etc. and see who scores the highest. (There is a sample one in Earth Ministry’s *The Greening Congregation Handbook*.)
- If your group is agreeable to singing, find a good hymn to go along with the day’s theme. Possibilities include *God Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens*, Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW) 463 or Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW) 771.
- For an in-depth, secular resource on bioregionalism and “Discovering A Sense of Place” (in an eight-session group discussion course), contact the Northwest Earth Institute, Portland, Oregon at (503) 227-2807 or www.nwei.org.

Endnotes

- 1 Universe statistics are drawn from *The Whole Shebang – A State of the Universe(s) Report* by Timothy Ferris and *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos* by Brian Swimme. See Resources.
- 2 Brian Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos: Humanity and the New Story*, (Orbis, 1996), 100.
- 3 Sittler’s essay is reprinted in *Evocations of Grace* (28); see Resources.
- 4 This analogy was first conceived by Robert Overman; it is referenced by Larry Rasmussen, in his book, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 27.
- 5 Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 28.

Rediscovering Our Place in Creation

A Call to Prayer

(to be read in unison)

We who have lost our sense and our senses—our touch, our smell, our vision of who we are; we who frantically force and press all things, without rest for body or spirit, hurting our Earth and injuring ourselves:

We call a halt.

We want to rest. We need to rest and allow the Earth to rest. We need to reflect and to rediscover the mystery that lives in us, that is the ground of every unique expression of life, the source of the fascination that calls all things to communion.

We declare a Sabbath, a space of quiet: for simple being and letting be; for recovering the great, forgotten truths; for learning how to live again.

(“Let us pray...” or other petitions may be added here, or simply conclude.)

Amen.

* Prayer taken from *Only One Earth*, United Nations Environmental Programme “Environmental Sabbath” materials, 1990.

Introductory Reflection

The question that needs to be asked is whether we truly know that we live on, and as a part of, the Earth. Of course, theologically, we would say that we are “in the world” but not “of” the world. But, how aware *are* we, typically, of our physical, biological, and ecological *connection* to the rest of the natural world? Scientists tell us that our bodies are made of the elements of stardust, generated in cosmic explosions eons ago. The Bible teaches us that we have been made out of the dust of the Earth and that in Christ, all things hold together—you might call that the theological counterpart to the ecological reality that all things are interconnected.

In modern times, however, and especially in developed countries, it seems that many people have become disconnected from the natural world. It’s “the environment”—something separate from us, a mere backdrop for human activities—a storehouse of goods for our use. Thomas Berry, in his book *The Dream of the Earth*, speaks of this as a type of “autism,”¹ that insulates us from feeling the reality of our inherent connection to the world around us. In such a state of limited awareness, it becomes all too easy to harm the natural world and its creatures, forgetting that we *are* connected, and that we need a healthy planet to sustain our lives.

Furthermore, the testimony of both scientists and spiritual teachers is that the natural world also sustains us in psychological and spiritual ways, as well.

Questions to ponder

In what ways have you experienced a connection to nature?

Is there a particular place in the natural world that especially nourishes you or makes you feel closer to God?

Endnotes

1 Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 16.

Rediscovering Our Place in Creation

Participant 1.2

A Commentary

by ELCA Presiding Bishop
Mark S. Hanson

“We cannot escape the interconnectedness of the earth’s fabric of life. Creation is the matrix of all our activities, both as human beings and as Christ’s church. God gives us and all creatures life through the water, air, food, and all the other gifts that come to us from the earth. Everything we do both depends on these gifts, and has some kind of impact upon them. If these gifts are treated with contempt and abused, people, animals, and plants suffer together. If they are graciously received and cherished, people will flourish with the rest of creation. We cannot love God or our human neighbor without caring for creation. The question is not *whether* the church will engage what our society calls the environment, but *how*.”

* Excerpt of a November 2003 Letter, commemorating the 10th Anniversary of the ELCA’s social statement: Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope & Justice.

Question to ponder

What is your hopeful vision, as a child of God, for how humans should live on the Earth in connection with the rest of creation?

The ancient worldview

This is what the known world seemed to be like to ancient eyes: the Earth held up by pillars, with waters below, welling up in rivers, lakes, and oceans, with above the “firmament,” like a dome, that the sun and stars moved across, and with “floodgates” to let in the rain and snow. How far we have come in our understanding, of the nature of the universe, and where the Earth fits into it!

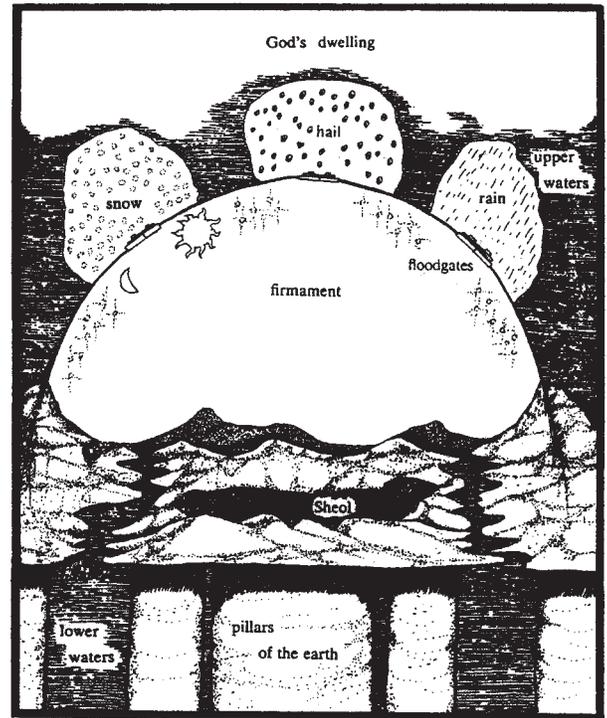


Illustration from *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* by Lawrence Boadt, Paulist Press, NY, 1984, page 115. Used by permission.

Closing

“Earth Ball” by Olaf Skarshott

If the earth were only a few feet in diameter, floating a few feet above a field somewhere, people would come from every where to marvel at it. People would walk around it marveling at its big pools of water, its little pools and the water flowing between the pools. People would marvel at the bumps on it, and the holes in it, and they would marvel at the very thin layer of gas surrounding it and the water suspended in the gas. The people would marvel at all the creatures walking around the surface of the ball, and in the water. The people would declare it precious because it was the only one, And they would protect it, so that it would not be hurt. The ball would be the greatest wonder known, and people would come to behold it, to be healed, to gain knowledge, and to know beauty and to wonder how it could be. People would love it, and defend it with their lives, because they would somehow know that their lives, their own roundness, could be nothing without it.

If the earth were only a few feet in diameter.

Awakening to
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Session Two

God's Presence Fills all Creation

2

The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.

Psalm 65:12-13

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God's Presence Fills All Creation

Leader Guide

2

Leader Tips and Advance Preparation

- It would be great if this session could be conducted outdoors! If not, aim to foster the inclusion of “nature” in whatever creative ways you can—for example, bring to your gathering area a small collection of natural objects (even simple stones will do, if varied and interesting). You may wish to have one particular item as a focus point or centerpiece.
- There will be a “take-home spiritual exercise,” based on quotes by ancient Christian saints and teachers. Copy the two **Historical Voices on Creation** pages from the Appendix (*see pages 46-47*) and cut out each individual quote, so that there will be one on each slip of paper; fold each in half and place in a basket. These will be distributed at the end of the session. Make sure there will be sufficient copies for the number of participants (each person needs one; there may be some extras by using the seven quotes from the Opening Reflection—see below).
- For the Opening Reflection, you will need to make a copy of the Leader Resource page for Session Two: **Ancient Teachers and Voices on Creation and God's Presence** (*found in the Participant pages for this session, page 21*). On this page, you will note that there are seven numbered quotes. Cut them apart so that you can give them to seven individual readers. If you have less than seven members in your group, you can read some of the quotes yourself, or have readers do more than one.
- Arrange the seating for this session, if possible, such that participants can sit in a circle.
- Just prior to beginning the session, ask for up to seven volunteers, to read the “Ancient Voices” quotes during the Opening Reflection. You should instruct them to read them in order, beginning at your signal, and to allow at least 10 seconds of silent pause between each quote. As they read a quote, they may also name the person it is from, and the dates of that person's life (helps establish the context and long history of such words).

Opening the Session

Welcome group participants and invite introductions, if there are any new members. Allow a short time for any questions or reflections anyone would like to share from Session One.

The **Introduction** may then be read aloud before the **Opening Prayer and Reflection**, or participants may simply read it silently, prior to beginning the session, for their own preparation and reflection.

Introduction and Opening Prayer are on the Participant page for Session Two (*see page 18*). Invite the participants to join with you in the prayer: “Let us pray...”

Opening Reflection with “Ancient Teachers and Voices on Creation and God's Presence.” Describe what the quotes are (i.e., “Ancient Teachers” etc.) that you will be using for the Opening Reflection. Invite participants to listen in a contemplative fashion and to quietly reflect, as the series of quotes are read aloud by your designated readers.

When all of the quotes have been read, allow a short time of silent reflection before proceeding with the discussion on spirituality.

Spirituality/ Creation Spirituality

Question the group members:

How would you describe or define “spirituality”?

Just a short answer or phrase will do; there is no single, or right or wrong, answer here. This may be handled as a group discussion question, but you may find it helpful to give participants one or two minutes to jot something down in the space provided on their handout page.

After a short opportunity for sharing of participants’ answers on how they define spirituality, you may find it helpful to read the following short descriptions:

You may say:

One way to define and describe spirituality is that it grows out of *the depth of our awareness of God’s presence*, both within our own being and within all that surrounds us—other people, events, or creation itself. For many, a sense of spirituality might come most naturally in their awareness of God’s presence “in, with, and under” the elements of Holy Communion and through Holy Scripture, God’s written Word.

So: What makes “creation spirituality” different?

It’s not so much that it’s different, but it does involve, for some, a new way of seeing and a new way of learning to be receptive to God’s immanence, or presence, within the natural world. St. Augustine called creation God’s other “great book.” Another well-known Church father, Thomas Aquinas, put it this way:

Sacred writings are bound in two volumes, that of Creation and that of Holy Scripture.

So, creation spirituality might be understood as growing closer to God, by learning to read also from the “book of creation.”

Awakening to God’s Call to Earthkeeping

Questions for reflection and discussion

Have participants form pairs or groups of three, and discuss the following questions among themselves. Allow approximately five to 10 minutes. Space is provided on the handout, if you feel the participants would rather write down their thoughts and then share in a discussion with either their small group or the group as a whole.

- Have you ever felt God’s presence in creation or “nature”? When? Where? How?
- Have you ever felt more spiritually alive or “awakened” (had an “epiphany”) by an experience in nature?

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

and a sampling of his comments about creation

Introduction suggestion:

“Let’s take a moment to hear some of the things that Martin Luther had to say about God and creation...”

Invite individual group members to read the Luther quotes aloud, in turn (*see page 19*).

Discussion

Allow a short time for general comments or use the questions below, as a group or in the small groups from the previous discussion.

- Have you ever heard of any of these quotes by Luther before?
- Do you find them surprising?
- What feelings or thoughts do they stir up for you?

Considering God’s Immanence and the Hymn of all Creation

Leader reads aloud:

When we read or hear of Luther saying something like “The power of God is present at all places, even in the tiniest tree leaf,” it may be helpful to understand the definition of the term “immanence” and to know the difference between *pantheism* and *panentheism*.

Theologically, God is understood to be both “transcendent” and “immanent”—transcendent, meaning above and beyond all that is, but also *immanent*, meaning “indwelling” or abiding within and pervading all of creation. Some people may feel uneasy about thinking of God as being present in all creation. However, such an awareness of God’s presence is not to be confused with “pantheism”—the worship of natural items or entities *as* God, or gods. Another term that some have used in recent years to help make that distinction, is “pan-*en*-theism,” an understanding that God is in (“en”) all that is, as well as above and beyond all that is.

God’s indwelling love and grace inspires and calls forth what we might think of as the “hymn of all creation.” Consider this text, just one of many that describe aspects of this holy, God-praising response by creation itself:

The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.

Psalm 65:12-13

And, how often have we declared in our liturgy, our intention to be a part of that holy hymn, in our Eucharistic Hymn of Praise:

Sing with all the people of God, and join in the hymn of all creation:

Blessing, honor, glory, and might be to God and the Lamb forever. Amen.

Lutheran Book of Worship, “Hymn of Praise,” Holy Communion, pages 61, 81 and 102

Discussion

Choose one or more of the following questions for group sharing.

- Have you ever thought about what is meant by “the hymn of all creation”?
- How and where do you hear the hymn of all creation?
- Do you think it is manifested only in the audible sounds in creation? Or might a field full of wildflowers or dew-laced spider webs “shout and sing” its own kind of praises to God?
- How might we learn new ways to hear the hymn of all creation?
- Do you think that we, as humans, add to the harmony of that hymn, or do we also (too often?) strike discordant notes?

Fostering a deeper (creation) spirituality: How? Where do we start?

A shorter summary of this section is provided on the handout for individual reflection at home, but if you have time, it could be helpful for you to read the following aloud, and to review the “spiritual exercises” prior to closing this session with prayer.

You may say:

Probably the easiest place to start is in simply *paying attention* and making use of all of our senses, when we are outdoors. We can try to be more conscious of the fact that we, as humans, are a part of nature, not separate from it. We can pray for openness of heart, mind, and spirit to God’s presence woven throughout creation.

We can try to understand our physical “place” in new and deeper ways—we can learn the names of creatures, trees, and plants in our bioregion, for example. At sundown, we might try to be intentionally conscious of the fact that the Sun is not really going “down,” but rather, that our part of the Earth is *turning away*. When we look at the stars at night, we should know that we’re not just looking “up,” but also out and down, into vast reaches of space that, without the force of gravity, we would tumble into!

A common spiritual practice for deepening one’s connection to God is to use a simple, repeated phrase as a prayer-like meditation. Using such a phrase while walking outdoors can be a way to prepare ourselves to be more open and receptive to what God would have us see or learn from creation, and so become a pathway to a deeper spirituality.

An example of a phrase you might try, would be either of these two which we used in this session:

“All creation is a symphony of praise to God.”

Hildegard of Bingen

“The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God.”

St. John Damascene

With practice, we will find that God’s Spirit can touch us through certain images in nature to help inform, enrich, and enliven our prayers or even mirror, in a metaphorical way, something we are experiencing in our own life and help to bring clarity to the situation.

You will recall that our Lord Jesus himself frequently went into the wilderness to pray, and that he would often use natural images and metaphors to illustrate his parables.

Of course, in urban areas, finding “wilderness” can be nearly impossible; and finding special “nature moments” to reflect on God’s goodness can also seem challenging. However, we might be surprised at how often life—greenery, creatures—will try so hard to occupy any niche it can find. While we may discover unexpected beauty in such places, we should also open our eyes anew to the challenged, and often less beautiful, urban corners of creation.

Something for us to think about: How might we help to bring healing, freshness, life, and greenness to even such places, as “ambassadors” of Christ’s reconciliation—in the restoration of right relationship—of all things?

In Summary

Fostering a deeper sense of spirituality, through connecting with God in creation, is about nurturing a deeper awareness of our surroundings ...breathing in the joys (as well as the sorrows) evident in the natural world and listening more carefully for “the hymn of all creation.” What is God trying to teach us, through this “other book” of scripture?

“Spiritual Exercises” you can try at home

Leader reviews and describes the suggestions for the following reflection exercises.

Each participant should also select one slip of paper, with a quote from the “Ancient Voices” collection (of saints, theologians, etc.) for exercise #1 that the Leader prepared ahead of time.

You may say:

- Take some time each day to read the quote you received; read it outside or reflect on it during your prayer time, whether that’s inside or (preferably) outside. What words or phrase most catches your attention? How does this particular quote have meaning to you? How might you weave it into your prayers?

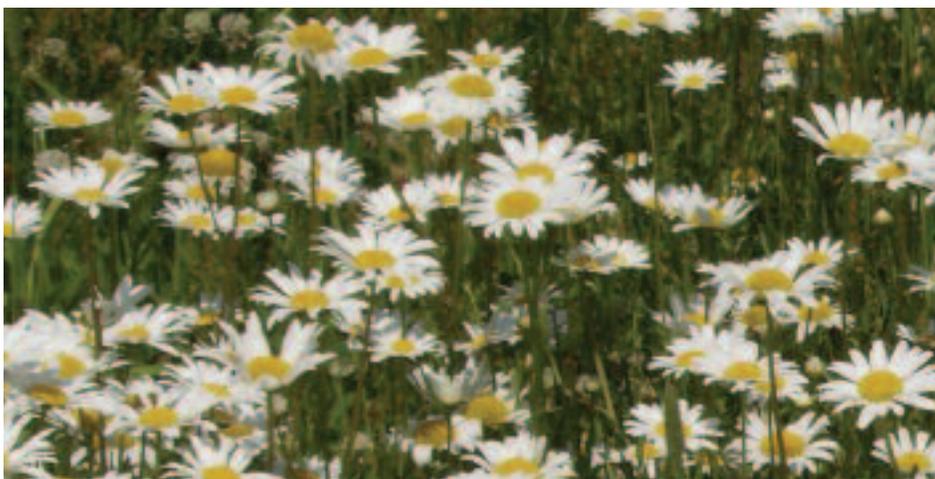


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- Visit a natural area, or even your own backyard, and try reading from the “book of creation,” by reflecting upon the images, objects, or creatures that draw your attention. Keep notes about your experiences in a prayer journal. What is God revealing to you? What is God saying to your heart?
- Write a “Letter to the Creator.” What would you say to God, in a letter, to express your appreciation for (or even your questions about) the natural world? About your particular corner of creation? What, specifically, would you thank God for? What would you express sorrow about? What would you tell God that you will do, to help heal creation?

Leader Note – if members of your group are agreeable, you may wish to extend an invitation to them to share their “Letters” with the full group, at the beginning of Session Three or at another time of gathering (if you are on retreat, for example).

Closing

Read by Leader or a volunteer, using Leader’s guide.

A Scripture Reading

(Psalm 19:1-4a)

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

Let us pray:

How wonderful, O Lord, are the works of your hands! The heavens declare your glory; the arch of sky displays your handiwork. In your love You have given us the power to behold the beauty of your world robed in all its splendor. The sun and the stars, the valleys and the hills, the rivers and lakes, all disclose your presence. The roaring breakers of the sea tell of your awesome might. The beasts of the field and the birds of the air bespeak your wondrous will. In your goodness you have made us able to hear the music of the world. The voices of loved ones reveal to us that You are in our midst. A divine voice sings through all creation.

– a Jewish Prayer

Help us, O Lord, to hear your voice more clearly!

And let the people say,

Amen!

Options for expanding Session Two

- Incorporate appropriate hymns, such as *When Long Before Time* (With One Voice [WOV] #799 or ELW #861) or *The Canticle of the Sun* by Marty Haugen (Anthology I:1980).
- Visit a natural area and conduct a prayer service to celebrate creation and to pray for healing and reconciliation between humankind and the Earth and its creatures.
- Expand on themes and ideas raised in this session, as a group, in a weekend retreat.
- Do further study on Hildegard of Bingen and learn about her concept of *viriditas*, or “greening power.” Book suggestion: *Praying with Hildegard of Bingen*, by Gloria Durka, in the “Companions for the Journey” series by Saint Mary’s Press, Winona, MN, 1991.
- Read aloud (assigning parts) in class or in worship, *Old Turtle*, a book by Douglas Wood, Pfeiffer-Hamilton Publishers, MN, 1992 (*see Resources*).
- Show and discuss one or both of **The Greening of Faith** videos (*see Resources*).
- Visit and walk an outdoor labyrinth; be open to God’s presence, seek to learn something new about God’s love for you and how the Earth and others may need your talents and gifts.
- Plan and plant a natural area, garden, or meditative garden on your congregation’s grounds.



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God's Presence Fills All Creation

Introduction

In this session, we will consider how we might open our hearts more fully to God's presence and revelation within the natural world. You may be surprised that this form of spiritual awareness comes from a long and ancient tradition of Christian writers, thinkers, and even Martin Luther himself! What can these voices teach us today? How do we define "spirituality" and "creation spirituality"? What's the difference? Is there a difference? Could it help us to act differently? What "spiritual disciplines" might help us to connect more deeply with God through the testimony of creation?

Opening Prayer

Holy and gracious Lord, we give you thanks for the wonders, the mysteries, the blessings, and the beauty of creation.

Open our hearts, and attune our spirits, to your voice and presence as it flows through, sustains, and fills all the Earth.

Grant that we may come to know you more deeply, and hear more clearly, the ways that you call us to care for your good creation, and for one another.

In Jesus' name we pray, **Amen.**

Reflection

Listen now with your ears, mind, and heart to the words of several ancient Christian teachers, who wrote and spoke about God's presence in creation...

Discussion question

How would you define or describe "spirituality"? What does it mean to you, personally?

Spirituality / Creation Spirituality

Discussion questions

Have you ever felt God's presence in creation or "nature"? When? Where? How?

Have you ever felt more spiritually alive or "awakened" (had an "epiphany") by an experience in nature?

God's Presence Fills All Creation

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

...and a sampling of his comments about creation

[Note: "LW" = Luther's Works, a scholarly compilation of his writings.]

God wants to be praised for nourishing and cherishing, for God cherishes all creatures. God is not only the Creator, but is also the Sustainer and Nourisher.

(LW 5:197)

God's entire divine nature is wholly and entirely in all creatures, more deeply, more inwardly, more present than the creature is to itself.

(LW 37:60)

God is entirely and personally present in the wilderness, in the garden, in the field.

(LW 37:61)

God is wholly present in all creation, in every corner, behind you and before you. Do you think that God is [just] sleeping on a pillow in heaven?

(LW 51:43)

God is in all creatures, even in the smallest flowers!

(LW 54:327)

The power of God is present at all places, even in the tiniest tree leaf.

(LW 37:57)

God writes the Gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars.

(Attributed to Luther; exact source in his writings unknown)

Questions for discussion:

Have you ever heard of any of these quotes by Luther before?

Do you find them surprising?

What feelings or thoughts do they stir up for you?

God's Presence Fills All Creation

Fostering a deeper (creation) spirituality (take-home reflection)

Fostering a deeper sense of spirituality, through connecting with God in creation, is about nurturing a deeper awareness of your surroundings ...breathing in the joys (as well as the sorrows) evident in the natural world and listening more carefully for "the hymn of all creation." Probably the easiest place to start is in simply *paying attention* and making use of all of your senses, when you are outdoors. Pray for openness of heart, mind, and spirit to God's presence woven throughout creation. With practice, you will find that God's Spirit will touch you through certain images in nature to help inform, enrich, and enliven your prayers or

even mirror, in a metaphorical way, something you are experiencing in your life and help to bring clarity to the situation. Recall that our Lord Jesus frequently went into the wilderness to pray, and that he would often use natural images and metaphors to illustrate his parables.

What is God teaching you, through this "other book" of scripture?

Spiritual Exercises you can try at home

- Take some time each day to read the quote you received; read it outside or reflect on it during your prayer time. What words or phrase most catches your attention? How does this particular quote have meaning to you? How might you weave it into your prayers?
- Visit a natural area, or even your own backyard, and try reading from the "book of creation" by reflecting upon the images, objects, or creatures that draw your attention. Keep notes about your experiences in a prayer journal. What is God revealing to you?
- Write a "Letter to the Creator". What would you say to God, in a letter, to express your appreciation for (or even your questions about) the natural world? What, specifically, would you thank God for? What would you express sorrow about? What would you tell God that you will do, to help heal creation?



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Ancient Teachers and Voices on Creation and God's Presence

1

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.

So they are without excuse.

—Romans 1:19-20

2

For even creation reveals the One who formed it, and the very work suggests the One who made it, and the world manifests the One who made it.

— St. Irenaeus of Lyons (130-200AD)

3

For when one considers the universe, can anyone be so simple-minded as not to believe that the Divine is present in everything, pervading, embracing and penetrating it?

For all things depend upon God who is, and nothing can exist which does not have its being in God who is.

— St. Gregory of Nyssa (335-395)

4

Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it. Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead he set before your eyes the things that he had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?

— St. Augustine (354-430)

5

The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God.

— St. John Damascene (675-749)

pronounced "dama-see-en"

6

Without the Word of God no creature has being. God's Word is in all creation, visible and invisible. The Word is living, being, spirit, all verdant greening, all creativity. All creation is awakened, called, by the resounding melody, God's invocation of the Word.

All creation is a symphony of praise to God.

— Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

7

The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw—and knew—all things in God and God in all things.

— Mechtild of Magdeberg (1210-1279)

Awakening to
God's call to
Earthkeeping

Session Three

Biblical Foundations for Earthkeeping

3

Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes.

Ezekiel 47:9,11

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Biblical Foundations for Earthkeeping Leader Guide

3

Humans, in service to God, have special roles on behalf of the whole of creation.

Made in God's image, we are called to care for the Earth as God cares for the Earth.

—ELCA social statement,
**Caring for Creation: Vision,
Hope, and Justice**

Leader Tips and Advance Preparation

- You may wish to have Bibles available, even though the study texts will be printed in the Participant pages.
- In the Participant pages for Session Three, you will find both the usual double-sided handout, plus several pages of biblical texts, divided into three groupings:
 - Group I** – Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament)
 - Group II** – New Testament
 - Group III** – Prophetic TextsYou will need the basic handout for each participant, but only one set per group of the biblical texts.
- Plan how to arrange your room to facilitate smaller group discussions (e.g., how many chairs in each of at least three groups). A paper flip chart or blackboard may be helpful, if you wish to record comments from the closing discussion.

Plan the small group work

This session, in particular, will require some extra prior consideration and planning for how best to utilize the material, which will depend in part on (1) the size of your group and (2) the time allotted for this session.

- Ideally, your group's size will allow for dividing participants into three smaller groups, each of which would focus on one of the three main text collections. If there are enough people to form a fourth small group, you could divide the Old Testament text pages.
- You should allow at least 30 minutes for the small group work, with another 10 minutes for discussion when the full group reconvenes, plus time for the Closing.
- You will notice that each of the main text collections is divided into four sub-sections, each with several texts and accompanying discussion questions. If there is insufficient time (or if the small group chooses), choosing only one or two texts from within a subsection may provide a "sampling" to help address the discussion question(s).
- Another alternative would be to have the full group address one main text collection at a time (i.e., OT, NT, Prophets) and break into four smaller groups—one for each subsection—and reconvene the full group three times, at shorter intervals.
- Suggest that each small group choose a facilitator, to help the group move through the texts and discussion questions, and who can later summarize one or two key insights from their group, when the full group reconvenes. The small group facilitator may also find it helpful to read aloud the short introduction for their text collection, before beginning their work.
- The small group can decide whether they will take turns in reading the texts aloud or divide up the texts for individual reading, before discussion of the questions.
- Approximately five minutes before the full group reconvenes, ask the groups to bring their work to a close and to jot down some answers to the "summary overview questions" on their handout.

Opening the Session

Leader welcomes group participants; invite introductions, if needed.

Ask if anyone would like to share any comments on their experiences or reflections since the last session (or their “Letter to the Creator,” if they wrote one and feel moved to share it). Allow up to 10 minutes for this; however, if more extensive discussion is desired, you may wish to extend the biblical study into an additional session.

You may say:

In today’s session, we will read and discuss some of the biblical texts that “eco-theologians” often draw upon, to build a scriptural foundation for our call to earthkeeping. The verses used here should not be seen as an exhaustive list. God’s Word is full of guidance for how to live rightly on this Earth, as well as many doxological (God-praising) texts that include creation.

Some general questions to have in mind, as we explore these texts, might be:

- What should be the nature of our “dominion”?
- In what ways do these texts reflect our modern ecological realities?
- How do these texts give us guidance or speak to our hearts today?

Opening prayer/ responsive litany

(See page 26.)

Small group discussion of texts

Direct the participants to form three small groups, if they have not done so already, and explain the process for the biblical text study and discussion. Remind them to refer to their Participant pages for overview questions and spaces for making notes.

Sharing with one another

full group discussion

Give participants a reminder to finish up their work five minutes before you call for the full group to reconvene.

From each group: Ask for a spokesperson to share one or two key insights that their group derived from the texts studied.

Questions to everyone:

- What impression did you come away with, from these texts, for how we ought to relate to the rest of creation? For how we relate to God as Creator?
- Did you discover anything new?
- Can we summarize? What does God’s Word call us to? Can you describe it in one-word answers? List them *(for example, words like: awe, humility, gratitude, praise, service, etc.)*.

NOTE: Before closing with prayer, ask participants to prepare for Session Four by using the “Take-home reflection” on Participant page 3.2 *(see page 27)*.

Closing Prayer

Gracious and Holy Lord,

We give you thanks for your living Word of Holy Scripture. And we ask that you would continue to speak to us through it, that we may open our minds and our hearts anew, to know what it means in our time to live in covenant with you and in right relationship with all of creation.

We pray this in the name of Jesus the Christ, in whom we live and move and have our being, and in whom, all things hold together.

Amen.

Options for expanding Session Three

- Incorporate a hymn (Ex. “*Touch the Earth Lightly*,” #254, in the Renewing Worship Songbook or ELW #739)
- Study and discuss the ELCA’s 1993 social statement, *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice*, available online at www.elca.org/socialstatements/environment. There is also a short study guide at www.elca.org/dcs/epr/environment/pdf/cfc_discussionGuide.pdf
- Another document worthy of further study, is “*God’s Earth is Sacred: An Open Letter to Church and Society in the U.S.*” (eight pages) drafted by a group of theologians, including several notable Lutherans, in spring 2005 (available on the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Ministries Web site: www.nccco-justice.org). There is also a four-part study guide now available, “Opening the Letter,” at this Web site.
- Learn more about the Endangered Species Act; do you find any echoes of the story of Noah (Gen. 9) and God’s covenant with all the creatures of Earth in those advocating for the preservation of species? Are they modern day Noah’s? See www.elca.org/advocacy for updates on the ESA and other environmental legislation.
- Show a video, such as *Keeping the Earth* or *Affluenza* (see Resources); what biblical texts are referenced? What would the prophets say today, about our materialism?
- Do a “survey” of the Psalms to “collect” the examples of verses that include references to creation or note the various creatures that God proudly describes in Job 39-40, and the aspects of the natural world in Job 38. You could form prayer petitions on behalf of the members of creation mentioned in these verses or for endangered species; or you could create a responsive litany from such verses, to use in worship.
- Take note of the nature metaphors used by Jesus in his teachings. (Examples: Matthew 6:26-30; Matthew 12:33-37; Matthew 13:24-30, 31-32; Mark 4:26-29, 30-32; John 15:1-8)

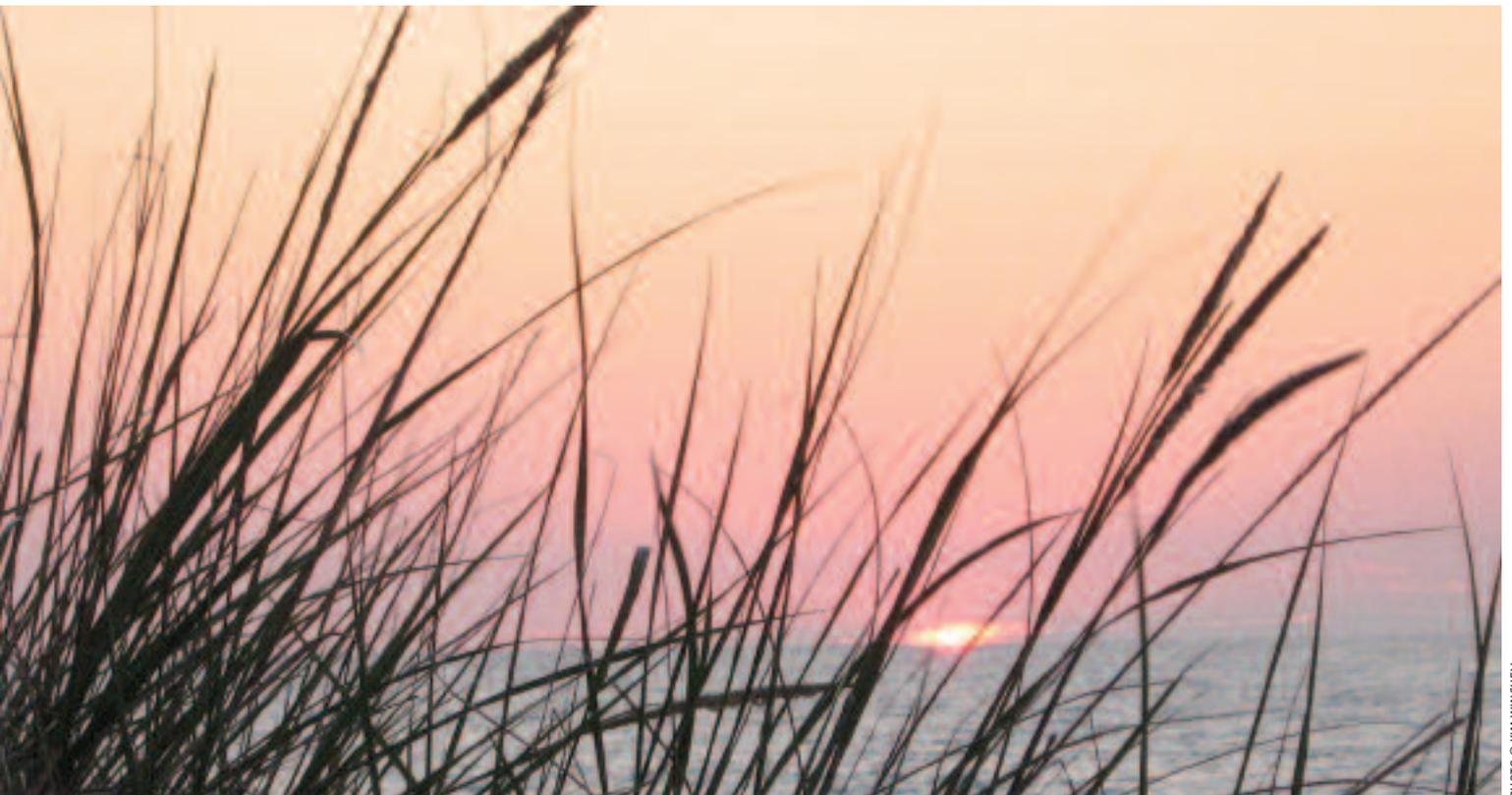


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Biblical Foundations for Earthkeeping

Opening prayer / responsive litany

Ever-living God, you created the Earth and all that is in it and found it very good.

Forgive us all that we have done to harm the Earth and one another.

God of life and love, you created all that exists to sustain life on the Earth, human life and all forms of life, and the landscapes and ecological systems that underlie all life.

Forgive us for squandering the incredible natural riches of this Earth, using your creation as if it were merely a collection of objects for our use alone.

God of grace, you sent your Son, Jesus Christ, to reconcile all things, making peace by the blood of his cross, and making us ambassadors of his will for restored relationships.

Forgive us for not truly understanding what it means to “live abundantly” in the richness of relationships built on justice, peace, compassion, and sustainable inter-relationship with all of your creation.

God of mercy and hope, forgive us our apathy and arrogance, short-sightedness and greed. Guide us now in the study of your Holy Word, that we may understand what you call us to do.

Give us the wisdom, compassion, and courage to do all that we can to restore, preserve, and protect your creation.

All praise and glory are yours, now and forever.

Amen.

Humans, in service to God, have special roles on behalf of the whole of creation. Made in God’s image, we are called to care for the Earth as God cares for the Earth.

—**ELCA social statement, Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice**

General reflection questions to keep in mind:

- What should be the nature of our “dominion”?
- In what ways do these texts reflect our modern ecological realities?
- How do these texts give us guidance or speak to our hearts today?

Space for Notes during small group work

Biblical Foundations for Earthkeeping

Small group discussion of texts

Summary overview questions

What, if anything, did you find in the texts that can help guide you in your caring for creation?

Do the texts give you any new perspectives on how to relate to the rest of creation? To God as Creator?

What and how does God's Word call us to be, in our response as Earthkeepers? Can you describe it in one-word answers?

What are one or two key insights that your small group has discovered, in studying your assigned texts?

Closing Prayer

Gracious and Holy Lord,
We give you thanks for your living Word of Holy Scripture.

And we ask that you would continue to speak to us through it, that we may open our minds and our hearts anew, to know what it means in our time to live in covenant with you and in right relationship with all of creation. We pray this in the name of Jesus the Christ, in whom we live and move and have our being, and in whom, all things hold together.

Amen.

Take-home reflection

Prior to your next gathering, think about what current environmental issues are of most concern to you. Pray about them, and be open to God's guidance on what you as an individual, or your congregation as a group, might be able to do to help bring healing and restoration in regard to the issue(s). Listen with the ears of your heart—which is the seat of compassion—for that is often where God's Spirit speaks most powerfully, in that still, small voice.

You may wish to write down a list of your environmental concerns for reference in the next session.

Biblical Foundations for Earthkeeping

Group I: Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament)

How do we rightly understand “dominion”? Do a verse or two in Genesis say all there is say on this question? Some helpful language and historical background to have in mind: the Latin *dominus* (a root word for dominion) means “lord,” pertinent to humans described as being created in the *imago Dei* (image of God); the Hebrew *abad* and *shamar*, which we know as “till” and “keep” (Genesis 2:15), are used in a number of other places in the Old Testament, to signify “serve” and “protect/preserve.” Historically speaking, the creation story in Genesis 2 is considered the older, original (Yahwist) version, handed down by oral tradition, while the opening verses of Genesis 1 were added later, in what has been described as a “Priestly preface,” near the time of the end of exile in Babylon.

Revisiting dominion: Whose world is it? What is our role?

(Genesis 1:26-28; Genesis 2:7-8,15; Psalm 24:1; Psalm 8:3-6a; Psalm 104:24-26)

Genesis 1:26-28

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

Genesis 2:7-8, 15

...then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ...The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

Psalm 24:1

The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.

Psalm 8:3-6a

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands.

Psalm 104:24-26

O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

Questions for discussion/reflection

- How might we describe the nature of our “dominion”?
- How do you think we, as “images of God,” should relate to the rest of creation?
- How would you describe the *attitude* of the psalmist in Psalms 8 and 104?

Group 1: Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) *continued*

A vibrant creation praises God: What prompts the hymn of praise that arises from creation?

(Psalm 65:12-13; Psalm 96:11-12; Psalm 98:7-8; Psalm 148:3-5)

Psalm 65:12-13

The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothes themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.

Psalm 96:11-12

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD...

Psalm 98:7-8

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the LORD...

Psalm 148:3-5

Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created.

Question for discussion/reflection

- What does the phrase “the hymn of all creation” mean for you?

Sabbath rest and fruitfulness for all creation: Are only humans blessed to be fruitful?

(Genesis 1:20-22; Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:2-4a; Leviticus 26:14, 34-35; Ezekiel 34:18)

Genesis 1:20-22

And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.”

Exodus 23:10-11

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat.

Leviticus 25:2-4a

Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the LORD. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD ...

Leviticus 26:14,34-35

But if you will not obey me, and do not observe all these commandments...

Then the land shall enjoy its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its sabbath years.

As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your sabbaths when you were living on it.

Ezekiel 34:18

Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?

Questions for discussion/reflection

- Do you think that we, as a society, aim to preserve the fruitfulness of creation?
- If not, why not, do you think?
- What might allowing creation its own sabbath rest mean in our time or community?

Group 1: Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) *continued*

Species and their habitats: Do creatures have their own worth before God?

(Job 39:1, 5-8, 26-27; Ezekiel 47:9, 11;
Genesis 9:16)

Job 39:1,5-8, 26-27

[God asks] “Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer? ...Who has let the wild ass go free? Who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass, to which I have given the steppe for its home, the salt land for its dwelling place?

“It scorns the tumult of the city; it does not hear the shouts of the driver. It ranges the mountains as its pasture, and it searches after every green thing. ...Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high?”

Ezekiel 47:9,11

Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. ...But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt.

Genesis 9:16 [from story of Noah and the Flood, and God’s subsequent promise]

When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.

Questions for discussion/reflection

- Does creation itself have worth to God or is it only “for” us?
- How do these texts suggest that God views creation’s other-than-human members?
- Why are the swamps and marshes “left for salt”? Could it be to preserve a special habitat?



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Biblical Foundations for Earthkeeping

Group II: New Testament

You will discover that New Testament texts do not specifically address how we are to tend to environmental issues. For one thing, in biblical times and language, there was not the perception of “the environment” as something separate from humankind, nor were there the kinds of ecological issues with which we are faced today. Here, we must “do theology” and bring to bear our “context”—where we are and what issues we face—and, from that perspective, ask, “what does it mean to be faithful?” Christ’s reconciliation of “all things” calls us to fresh thinking and perhaps a deeper meaning, when viewed through an ecological and eco-justice lens. Just as the early Christians grasped new understandings of Old Testament texts, when viewed through their experience of Jesus, we can trust that the Spirit and the Holy Scriptures—God’s living Word—will teach and guide us anew in our time and place, as we bring our experiences and questions to these texts.

The breadth of God’s love and the hope of the Gospel: for humans alone?

(John 3:16-17; Mark 16:15; Colossians. 1:21-23)

John 3:16-17

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Mark 16:15

And [Jesus] said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.”

Colossians 1:21-23

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.

I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

Questions for discussion/ reflection

- What is the breadth of God’s love? Does it encompass only humans?
- Does it make any difference to our understanding of this verse, to know that what we translate as “world” here is *cosmos* in the original Greek? [John 3:16]
- How might the hope of the gospel be “proclaimed to every creature under heaven”?
- Might we have a part to play in that proclamation, as God’s servants?

Group II: New Testament *continued*

Inter-connectedness: Is it theological as well as ecological?

(Colossians 1:15-17)

Colossians 1:15-17

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.

He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

The late Lutheran theologian, Joseph Sittler, once used a phrase in writing about Psalm 104 that seems an echo of “in him all things hold together” and is worthy of our consideration here.

Sittler wrote:

“Here is a holy naturalism, a *matrix of grace* in which all things derive significance from their origin, and all things find fulfillment in praise.” [italics added]

From Sittler’s 1954 essay “A Theology for Earth,” included in Bouma-Prediger & Bakken, *Evocations of Grace*, 28]

Questions for discussion/reflection

- Do you find a similarity between the theological “matrix of grace” and the ecological reality of the interconnectedness of all life?
- Why or why not?

Reconciliation: What might that mean today, in an ecological/social sense?

(Colossians 1:19-20;
2 Corinthians 5:17-19)

Colossians 1:19-20

For in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 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.

2 Corinthians 5:17-19

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

Questions for discussion/reflection

- What does “reconciliation” mean to you?
- How can we (should we?) apply it to the rest of creation?

Creation groans, creation waits...

Romans 8:19-22

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that 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.

Questions for discussion/reflection

- In this text, creation waits “with eager longing” ...for whom? For what?
- How is creation “in bondage to decay” in our time?

Biblical Foundations for Earthkeeping

Group III: Voices of the Prophets

The role of the prophet is to call God's people to "wake up!"—to repent and change their ways, and to return to the Lord their God. Prophets, in their critique and laments, decry the peoples' broken relationship with God, as they forget the covenant, chase after false idols, and neglect justice and mercy. Such behaviors, the prophets warn, will lead to suffering for both people and the land itself. The prophetic task is two-fold, however; it is not simply a criticism of the way things are. Prophets also announce to the people a more hopeful vision, of how things *could* be. In terms of eco-justice in our society today, think about who has the louder prophetic voice: secular environmentalists, or the people of God? Is there a prophetic place for the church here?

Ancient words, modern ecological echoes?

(Isaiah 5:8; Isaiah 24:4-7)

Isaiah 5:8

Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!

Isaiah 24:4-7

The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the

everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left. The wine dries up, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh.

Questions for discussion/reflection

- Do you hear the modern echoes in these texts?
- In Isaiah 5:8, what about adding "shopping mall to shopping mall"? What does that kind of land use do to biodiversity?
- How does Isaiah 24:4-7 read, in light of global warming?

Prophetic exasperation and critique, as God's people turn away, and all creation suffers

(Jeremiah 8:7; Jeremiah 12:4; Ezekiel 34:18; Hosea 4:1-3)

Jeremiah 8:7

Even the stork in the heavens knows its times; and the turtledove, swallow, and crane observe the time of their coming; but my people do not know the ordinance of the LORD.

Jeremiah 12:4

How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who live in it, the animals and the birds are swept away, and because people said, "He is blind to our ways."

Ezekiel 34:18

Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of the clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?

Hosea 4:1-3

Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel; for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. *Therefore the land mourns*, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.

Questions for discussion/reflection

- Have you seen or felt the land mourning?
- If you care about the environment, do you find yourself getting exasperated?
- How do you think God feels?

Group III: Voices of the Prophets *continued*

The promised and hopeful vision for God’s faithful people: when they keep the covenant with God, and when relationships are restored and reconciled...

(Leviticus 26:3-5; Ezekiel 47:9,11-12; Revelation 22:1-2; Isaiah 11:6-9)

Leviticus 26:3-5

If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land.

Ezekiel 47:9,11-12 (on the river streaming from the Temple of God)

Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. ...But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.

Revelation 22:1-2

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. [Note the expansion from the vision of Ezekiel, “for the healing of *the nations*.”]

Isaiah 11:6-9

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Questions for discussion/reflection

- Again and again, the prophets told the people what they needed to do. Do people know today what to do, to be faithful in caring for the Earth?
- How helpful is it, to have a hopeful vision of what could be?
- What would a hopeful vision for our time be?

At the end of time, who leads the praises, and who is destroyed?

(Revelation 5:13-14; Revelation 11:18. Revelation is, of course, not usually included with traditional prophetic texts, but these verses reflect creation’s inclusion—and recompense—at the fulfillment of the reign of God.)

Revelation 5:13-14

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

Revelation 11:18

The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth.

Questions for discussion/reflection

- Who leads that holy hymn of praise?
- What is our part in it? Are we to be part of the “chorus” even now, or only in some future “end time”?
- How does it make you feel to read “the time has come for destroying those who destroy the earth”?

Awakening to
God's call to
Earthkeeping

Session Four

Creation Waits with Eager Longing!

4

*There is no
faithfulness or loyalty,
and no knowledge
of God in the land
...Therefore the land
mourns, and
all who live in it
languish;
together with
the wild animals and
the birds of the air,
and even the
fish of the sea
are perishing.*

Hosea 4:1b, 3



Creation Waits with Eager Longing!

Leader Guide

4

Leader Tips and Advance Preparation

- The main goals of this session are both to “wrap things up” and to facilitate an earnest conversation about “what’s next?” for the individuals in the group, and the congregation as a whole, in answer to God’s call to earth-keeping. Be sure to take note ahead of time of the various Leader instructions within the flow of this session.
- If you used the **Survey on Religious Faith and the Environment** (see *Appendix, page 45*) in or before the first session, plan to return those in this session (or have participants re-take the survey). It may be useful or of interest to the group for you to compile a summary of the pre-assessment survey answers, by determining the average numerical value of responses for each question (or by some other means, to illustrate the range of responses and to measure changes, as the survey is re-taken).

- If you or the participants have been collecting news clippings and magazine articles on current environmental issues (as suggested in Session One), these should be assembled and prominently visible for this gathering.
- Alternatively, you can compile a list of ecological concerns and problems from a source such as www.greenfacts.org/ecosystems/index.htm (a summary of the United Nations Millennium Ecosystem Assessment). The idea is to incorporate such ecological concerns—or others, as appropriate to current events or your region—into the Opening Prayer for this session. (Participants will also have an opportunity at the beginning of this session, to contribute ideas for the prayer petitions.)
- Another use for the articles may be in reading their headlines aloud during the “sharing of joys and sorrows,” later in the session.
- It would be helpful to have a white board or flip chart, for recording the ideas generated during the discussion on possible next steps for the group or congregation.

Opening the Session

Welcome the group members and invite them to take a few minutes to quietly read the “For Personal Reflection” excerpt from **“A Theology for Earthkeeping”** and to think about what ideas or concerns they would like to contribute for the Opening Prayer petitions. There is space to do so on the Participant page for this session.

After everyone has had time to read the excerpt, ask for suggestions and make a list of ecological and eco-justice concerns to fill in the places indicated in the Opening Prayer. Or, you can invite participants to offer those concerns aloud, during the prayer.

The following summary may then be read aloud, to begin your time together:

In this final session, we come to a doorway, of sorts. The sign on the door asks, “What’s Next?” and all of God’s creation waits on the other side. It’s time to consider what we’ve learned and felt, to reflect upon what joys and blessings we have found in God’s creation, and also what sorrows and concerns we may hold for the many ways in which creation is “groaning.” It’s time to search our hearts for what God’s Spirit is calling us to do, for creation waits, with the most eager longing, for our response.

Opening Prayer

Opening our hearts to God's Spirit, who enlightens and empowers us for service, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

We pray for this congregation and for the wider church, that as God's people, we will come to more faithfully tend God's good and precious creation.

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

We pray for those places in the world, where creatures and landscapes are suffering:

List concerns here; or group members may voice them aloud.

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Lord, we ask for wisdom, to address these problems; courage, to make the changes that may be needed; prophetic persistence, to speak truth to power and to keep striving toward healing for all of your creation.

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

We pray for all those human populations who may be suffering due to ecological degradations: those who lack clean water; those in the path of extreme weather, losing their lives, homes, or livelihoods; those suffering from increased pollution, disease, or famine; and any others we name at this time:

Second list here, or group members offer petitions aloud.

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Gracious Lord, guide us in our discussions and stir up our hearts, so that we may hear and follow your will, in awakening to our call to care for your Earth.

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Into your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your grace, mercy, and guidance. We pray all this in the name of Jesus the Christ, who came to reconcile all things, and who calls us to continue that reconciliation, in the restoration of mutually sustainable relationships between humankind and all creation.

Amen.

Assessing our journey in “Awakening to God’s Call to Earthkeeping”

Revisiting the survey on Religious Faith and the Environment

Distribute the pre-assessment surveys. Take a few minutes for group members to privately review what they had answered, when the survey was first completed (prior to or during Session One). This is a time for individual reflection on what, if anything, new was learned or whether any attitudes have shifted as a result of the sessions and group discussions. An alternate option would be to re-take the surveys. Allow participants five to 10 minutes to review their survey and to reflect on and answer the provided questions. If there is time, you may wish to have a brief time of group sharing of participants' reflections on what they have learned.

Joys and Sorrows, and the power of each, to motivate our earthkeeping

Leader facilitates this group discussion; asks for brief responses. Take a few minutes for group members to share aloud both their greatest “joy” in creation (such as a favorite place or moment) and also their greatest “sorrow” or concern (the collected “headlines” may be helpful here). You may wish to record the concerns and issues raised, perhaps making separate lists for local, state, national, and global issues.

Seeing with the eyes of the heart: A time of reflection

Invite the group members to take approximately 10 minutes to quietly read the provided reflection on “Apathy /Compassion and Romans 8:19” on their Participant page and to think about (or answer) the accompanying questions. Ask that the group remain silent until all are finished. If weather permits, you might encourage members to go outside to complete this exercise.

When you feel that sufficient time has passed, reconvene your group for the following discussion that addresses the very core purpose of why you all have undertaken this time of study together, over the four (or more) sessions.

This is the point where everyone's creative input is needed, as the group develops a list of earthkeeping ideas that could be adopted. You may wish to compile two lists: one for personal, and one for congregational, actions. If needed, there are also a number of suggestions in the Options, Ideas, Resources for “what's next?” material at the end of this session.

Group Discussion and Brainstorming: Ideas for response and action

Possible questions for inspiration (or use those on the Participant page):

- What will you do, in response to God's call? What does your heart say?
- What is creation itself saying to you? There are so many possible things that can be done to help heal the world—only begin! (If you have a whiteboard, you might write these questions out as a theme for the session or this closing discussion.)

Wrapping up: Allow some time before this session ends, to determine if there is any interest in taking the step of forming a “Green Team” or “Earthkeeping Committee” to help shepherd some of these ideas along and weave them more fully into the life of your congregation. Those interested may set a date for a follow-up planning discussion.

Closing

Leader should thank everyone for being a part of this group study; perhaps take a moment for a “passing of the peace” as a way to celebrate your last session. The Leader and participants conclude with the responsive **Closing Litany** of “Ecological Affirmations of Faith.” (See *Participant page 42*.)

Options, Ideas, Resources for “what’s next?”

- Form a congregational “Green Team,” “Earthkeeping Team,” or committee that can help to develop ongoing earthkeeping awareness and action in your congregation. See the Green Congregation Program materials on the Web of Creation, or the “Greening Congregations Handbook” by Earth Ministry, Seattle in “Resources.” Refer to the “Congregational Covenant for the Care of Creation” [*Appendix, page 48*] as one example of a framework to help guide your congregation in being more intentional about earthkeeping. The Green Congregation Program also has an excellent covenant model.
- Perhaps a weekend retreat could be planned for those in your congregation who would like to pursue forming an Earthkeeping Team, so that they can reflect, pray, and further discern where God is leading.
- Join with others: check with your synod, region, or national denominational office, for a support network and staff to assist you. Check the Web of Creation for updates on the formation of LENS—the Lutheran Earthkeeping Network of the Synods.
- Share earthkeeping information and reflections in your congregation's newsletter, worship bulletin inserts, or on a bulletin board in a congregational meeting space. Use scripture texts from Session Three in this guide or quotes from the ELCA's social statement or other pertinent documents. Encourage “alternative giving” options at Christmas time (such as from The Heifer Project or similar organizations).
- Offer additional study groups. Examples include studies on: the ELCA's *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice* social statement, or “Opening the Letter,” a study guide on the *God's Earth is Sacred* theological statement (2005, NCC Eco-Justice Ministries—see Resources), or the discussion guide on the movie **“An Inconvenient Truth”** (2006 movie about Al Gore's efforts to raise awareness on global warming) from Eco-Justice Ministries or The Regeneration Project (see Web sites in Resources). There are also in-depth study guides on subjects like *Voluntary Simplicity* and *Choices for Sustainable Living*, available from either Earth Ministry (206) 632-2426 [www.earthministry.org] or the Northwest Earth Institute (503) 227-2807 www.nwei.org.

Options, *continued*

- Work with your pastor and worship committee, to encourage special worship services or an ongoing inclusion of creation awareness within your liturgical practices.

Examples include:

- a Blessing of the Animals service near St. Francis' Day (Oct. 4)
- an "Earth Day Sunday" (near April 22). See the wonderful resources on the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Ministries Web site.
- a "Commitment Sunday" with an "offering" of individual earthkeeping commitments written on small slips of (recycled content!) paper
- an in-depth "Season of Creation" over four Sundays of Pentecost (see *www.seasonofcreation.com* for full liturgical settings)
- simply be more intentional about frequently using more creation-related hymns and prayer petitions.

- Obtain an energy audit of your church facility and take steps to save energy and money for other ministries. See if your state has an "Interfaith Power and Light" organization. (Contact The Regeneration Project—see Resources Web site list—if you're not sure.)

- Encourage members of your congregation to sign up for "e-advocacy" alerts or to attend a state or national "advocacy day" to speak to legislators about environmental issues of concern (contact your state ELCA public policy office or *www.elca.org/advocacy*) and learn more about issues through those offices. Issue information is also available through secular organizations such as *www.greenfacts.org* or *www.ucsusa.org*.

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Creation Waits with Eager Longing!

Participant 4.1

For Personal Reflection

Enlightened by the Spirit, we can hear, and respond to, creation’s cries, as it waits “with eager longing, for the revealing of the children of God” (Romans 8:19). There is healing work, that *each* of us can do.

Empowered by the Spirit, we can bear witness to God’s hope and unconditional love for the whole world (John 3:16) and, as “ambassadors” of Christ’s compassion, justice, and reconciliation, we can participate in the restoration of right relationships —for ALL creation.

Excerpt from “A Theology for Earthkeeping”

Opening Prayer

As Leader ends each petition with “Lord, in your mercy,” your response will be “Hear our prayer.”

Helping to construct the prayer:

“We pray for those places in the world, where creatures and landscapes are suffering...”

List your ideas or concerns below:

“We pray for all those human populations who may be suffering due to ecological degradations...”

List your ideas or concerns below:

Revisiting the Survey on Religious Faith and the Environment

Whether you are reviewing the same survey sheet which you filled in for Session One, or taking the survey today, take a few moments to quietly reflect on how your understanding, opinions, or attitudes may have changed or deepened during this group study process.

Filling in the following statements may help to guide your reflection:

I was surprised to discover that

I see creation as

I feel that God relates to creation by

I feel that our place in creation, as God’s people, is

Creation Waits with Eager Longing!

Seeing with the eyes of the heart

A time of personal reflection

Reflection: Apathy/Compassion and Romans 8:19

Recall, for a moment, how you felt when asked to share your greatest joy in creation, or when you heard the comments of others. Certainly, some of our interest in caring for the natural world around us is rooted in those joys and feelings of gratitude and awe, for all of the beauty and blessings we perceive within creation.

How do the various concerns and environmental problems make you feel? It's all too easy, sometimes, to want to avoid that sorrow or the feelings of despair or grief, at what has been damaged, lost, or destroyed. Sometimes, it can make us feel angry or helpless. As people of faith, we should know that there is another way, and that Christ aches with us, in all of those places and in the groaning of creation itself.

Sometimes, the apparent apathy or indifference that people feel towards environmental problems is not solely because they lack knowledge of the issue. There is also a self-protective sort of apathy, when we simply feel too overwhelmed by the number, or scope, of the problems. "What difference can I make?

I'm only one person!" It's easier to stop caring, stop hurting ...to turn inward and let the world worry about itself.

This is where we need to understand, and open our hearts, to the grace of Christ and the power of compassion. One of the best definitions of "compassion" (the direct linguistic opposite of apathy) is "to suffer with." When we can allow ourselves to "suffer with," to be open to that kind of sorrow, the very pain of creation or others, it's as if it opens within us a channel through which God's grace can flow to help bring healing to the world in some manner.

There is likely something right before you that you *can* do, especially if you join with others.

You certainly cannot solve a problem like global warming (for example) single-handedly, but you can change the type of lightbulbs in your house; you can look for ways to make your church building more energy efficient; you can arrange a carpool for church members; and you can "speak truth to power" to leaders and legislators, with advocacy actions to call for real steps to address even the large environmental problems.

We each have certain gifts and skills; we each have certain "spheres of influence," within the context of our homes, communities, jobs, or churches. There is something that YOU are uniquely positioned to do, that God is calling you to do, that will help to bring healing to the world in some way.

Through Christ, we can keep trying, in bold hope and trust, and as bearers of God's will for *shalom*.

Creation waits, with eager longing. What is creation looking for, from *you*?

Questions for reflection:

What do you feel God calling you to do?

What ideas do you have for your congregation to do, to practice more faithful earthkeeping and to weave it more fully into the life and witness of your congregation?

Closing Litany

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 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.

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 hungers for justice, God in Christ Jesus acts to restore and redeem all creation, including human beings. 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. We cling to God's trust-worthy 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" and to God's passionate desire to "renew the face of the Earth." *(Romans 8:22 and Psalm 104:30)*

All: 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.

Go in peace! Take the love of Christ to all creation!

Thanks be to God!

This Litany has been drawn from text excerpts from the "Ecological Affirmations of Faith" section of the *God's Earth is Sacred* theological statement, National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Ministries, 2005.

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Appendix

A Theology for Earthkeeping

How is “theology” helpful here? Consider its most basic definition: “faith seeking understanding.” We all, through our Baptism, are called to “do theology” ...to seek to know what God calls us to, in our ministry in daily life. We all are called to prayerfully reflect upon “What does it mean to be faithful, in our time and place?” and, more to the point, “What actions then flow from faith?”

Both ecologically *and* theologically, we are called to be mindful of how we live on this Earth, and those two ways of understanding our “place” can each inform our role. The health and wholeness of the human community is intertwined with the health and wholeness of the ecological community that sustains it. What actions ought to flow from our faith, when creation is “groaning” under widespread ecological degradations, and when the flood of human “environmental refugees” grows, poverty and hunger increase, species go extinct, and climate change causes all kinds of disruptions to landscapes, creatures, and livelihoods?

What can we look to for hope—now—and not just in some future, better world to come?

When we humans, through our ignorance, apathy, arrogance, and greed, degrade creation and diminish its fruitfulness, we diminish and harm ourselves; we disregard divine mandates to tend the Earth; and we mute creation’s ability to join with us in praising God. Furthermore, we disregard the historic prophetic call to God’s people to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God, when the profligate, unsustainable consumerism of industrialized countries uses the largest share of the world’s resources, and creates the highest proportion of wastes. This too often causes harm to the old, the young, the dispossessed, those without voice or whose voice is not heard, and will cause harm and injustice to the generations yet to come. We *do* need to live more simply, so that others may simply live.

Again and again, the prophets decry how even the land itself suffers, when people turn away from God, in chasing after false idols and neglecting justice and mercy.

The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. (Isaiah 24:4-5)

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There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land ...Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, and even the fish of the sea are perishing. (Hosea 4:1b, 3)

A Theology for Earthkeeping *continued*

Faith seeking understanding, in our day and time, means first reclaiming a proper understanding of “dominion” as *a sacred trust and humbling responsibility*, a most careful loving and keeping, as opposed to a reckless, abusive, domination. From the opening pages of Genesis, we are called to “keep” the Earth:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.
(Genesis 2:15)

In Genesis 2:15, the call to Adam (and by extension, to all of us) is to serve and protect (from the Hebrew, *abad* and *shamar*) the garden, the Earth.

We believe, after all, that we are made in God’s image (Genesis 1:27)—God, the gracious Creator, who loves, cares for, and “keeps” us. As an “image of God,” we are to reflect God’s ways in caring for the world around us, and to remember that God called all creation good—not just humans—and blessed it (Genesis 1:31).

Creation, itself, reveals God’s presence and sings God’s praises; we are called to join the Earth and all of its creatures, in that hymn of all creation.

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims [God’s] handiwork.

Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.
(Psalm 19:1-4a)

Sing with all the people of God, and join in the hymn of all creation: Blessing, honor, glory, and might be to God and the Lamb forever. Amen. (Lutheran Book of Worship, “Hymn of Praise,” Holy Communion, pages 61, 81 and 102)

In our human sinfulness of pride and arrogance, we have too often fallen short in our care for the Earth and one another. We must seek forgiveness for things done, and left undone, for neighbors (both human and other than human) left unloved. We lean on the power of the crucified and risen Christ, and believe that through his love and grace, we have been made right with God.

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible ...all things were created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ...For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 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. (Colossians 1:15ff)

We claim Jesus Christ as the one through whom all things are made, held together, and *reconciled* through the blood of the Cross. In Christ, we have been made new and called forth as disciples.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself ...and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.
(2 Corinthians 5:17-19)

And what is “reconciliation” here, if not a *restoration of right relationship* between God and humankind, yes ...between peoples, yes ...but also, in our time and place, a vital repair and restoration of *ecological* relationship, so that we and our descendants might live.
(Deuteronomy 30:19)

Enlightened by the Spirit, we can hear, and respond to, creation’s cries, as it waits “with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (Romans 8:19). There is healing work, that *each* of us can do. Empowered by the Spirit, we can bear witness to God’s hope and unconditional love for the whole world (John 3:16) and, as “ambassadors” of Christ’s compassion, justice, and reconciliation, we can participate in the restoration of right relationships – for *all* creation.

Faithful earthkeeping will thus become an *integral* part of our religious understanding, witness, and stewardship of all life ...in service to God and with love for one another, for the healing of the world.

—Kim Winchell, Diaconal Minister for Earthkeeping Education and Advocacy, North/West Lower Michigan Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

A Survey on Religious Faith and the Environment

Circle the number that best matches your response:

1 = strongly disagree

5 = strongly agree

1 I have a high awareness of environmental issues.

1 2 3 4 5

2 The Bible can give us guidance on how to deal with modern environmental issues.

1 2 3 4 5

3 People of faith have an important role to play in addressing environmental issues.

1 2 3 4 5

4 As humans, we are a part of the natural world, not separate from it.

1 2 3 4 5

5 Creation is primarily a God-given storehouse of goods for our use.

1 2 3 4 5

6 Creation is a blessing from God and we are entrusted with its care.

1 2 3 4 5

7 Creation is a sacred community of life, with intrinsic value apart from its use by humans.

1 2 3 4 5

8 Caring for people is totally separate from caring for the natural world.

1 2 3 4 5

9 God's presence fills all creation.

1 2 3 4 5

10 It is important for congregations to undertake Earth-healing actions as a witness to their faith and understanding of God.

1 2 3 4 5

11 I know where to find up-to-date information and resources about earthkeeping for my home and in our congregation.

1 2 3 4 5

12 I would like to see "creation themed" aspects incorporated into our worship service more than one Sunday a year.

1 2 3 4 5

Historical Voices on Creation

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

Psalm 19:1-4

For even creation reveals the One who formed it, and the very work suggests the One who made it, and the world manifests the One who made it.

**St. Irenaeus of Lyons
(130-200 AD)**

The Logos extends his power everywhere, illuminating all things visible and invisible, containing and enclosing them in himself, giving life and everything, everywhere, to each individually and to all together, creating an exquisite single euphonious harmony.

St. Athanasius (296-373 AD)

For when one considers the universe, can anyone be so simple-minded as not to believe that the Divine is present in everything, pervading, embracing and penetrating it? For all things depend upon God who is, and nothing can exist which does not have its being in God who is.

**St. Gregory of Nyssa
(335-395 AD)**

Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it. Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead he set before your eyes the things that he had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?

St. Augustine (354-430)

The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God.

St. John Damascene (675-749)

Christ wears 'two shoes' in the world: scripture and nature. Both are necessary to understand the Lord, and at no stage can creation be seen as a separation of things from God.

**John Scotus Eriugena
(810-877)**

Without the Word of God no creature has being. God's Word is in all creation, visible and invisible. The Word is living, being, spirit, all verdant green- ing, all creativity.

All creation is awakened, called, by the resounding melody, God's invocation of the Word.

All of creation is a symphony of praise to God.

**Hildegard of Bingen
(1098-1179)**

The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw, and knew, all things in God and God in all things.

**Mechtild of Magdeberg
(1210-1279)**

Throughout the entire creation, the wisdom of God shines forth from Him and in Him, as in a mirror containing the beauty of all forms and lights and as in a book in which all things are written according to the deep secrets of God.

...Truly, whoever reads this book will find life and will draw salvation from the Lord.

**St. Bonaventure
(1221-1274)**

Every creature is by its nature a kind of effigy and likeness of the eternal Wisdom. Therefore, open your eyes, alert the ears of your spirit, open your lips and apply your heart so that in all creatures you may see, hear, praise, love and worship, glorify and honour your God.

**St. Bonaventure
(1221-1274)**

Historical Voices on Creation *continued*

Because the Divine could not express itself in any single being, the Divine created the great multiplicity of beings so that the perfection lacking to one would be supplied by the others. Thus the whole universe together participates in and manifests the divine more than any single being whatever.

**St. Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)**

Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things. Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God. If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature—even a caterpillar—I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature.

Meister Eckhart (1260-1329)

God writes the Gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars.

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

The power of God is present at all places, even in the tiniest tree leaf. Do you think God is sleeping on a pillow in heaven? ...God is wholly present in all creation, in every corner, behind you and before you.

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Love all creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's life! Love the animals. Love the plants; love everything. If you love everything, you will soon perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.

**Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881)
(Russian writer, in *The Brothers Karamazov*)**

This simple covenant can be used as a framework to guide a congregation in being more intentional in its earthkeeping. Another covenant model is the congregational Affirmation statement, as used in the Green Congregation Program (see www.webofcreation.org).

This model was developed in the ELCA's N/W Lower Michigan Synod in 1999.

COVENANT FOR THE CARE OF CREATION

**The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it.
(Psalm 24:1)**

The church's concern for God's creation is shaped by the creative word of God, the love of God hanging on a cross, and the Spirit of God daily renewing the face of the earth. Caring, serving, keeping, loving, living by wisdom and compassion—these translate into striving for justice in social, economic, political, and environmental matters.

Therefore, the governing body of our congregation affirms the importance of healing and defending creation to our mission as God's people.

As a covenant congregation,

Congregation name

will:

STUDY AND LEARN about God's marvelous creation and our responsibility to God and our place in creation;

PRAY, PREACH, AND WORSHIP so that our environmental activities grow out of biblical faith, reverence, and love for God's creation;

MAKE CONGREGATIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL LIFESTYLE CHANGES to better model our concern and care for creation; and

GET INVOLVED in our communities, our state, our nation, and the world, to promote policies that foster justice and the wholeness of God's creation.

Through this covenant,

Congregation name

claims the promise of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1). We dedicate our congregation's life to the care and redemption of all that God has made, for the sake of Jesus Christ who lived, died, and was raised for us to reconcile us and all creatures of God. (Colossians 1:20)

Signed by the Pastor:

Signed by an officer of the congregation:

Pastor

Date

Officer

Date

Helpful Resources for a Faithful Response as Earthkeepers!

Videos/ DVD's

Keeping the Earth: Religious and Scientific Perspectives on the Environment

(1996; 27min)

VHS/DVD (includes a study guide)

Recommended; beautiful images, religious leaders and scientists speak about common interest of caring for creation and protecting the biosphere.

Union of Concerned Scientists, 617-547-5552
\$17.95 / members \$9.50

Lighten Up!

(2005; 25min) VHS

Includes information on energy efficiency and a biblical call to creation care. Narrated by the Rev. Sally Bingham, who started the "Interfaith Power & Light" concept.

The Regeneration Project, 415-561-4894
E-mail: info@theregenerationproject.org
\$15

The Greening of Faith – Why the Environment is a Christian Concern

(1993; 30min each) VHS

Part I: "Theology and Spirituality"; Part II: "Ethics"; by Earth Ministry, Seattle, with Cathedral Films & Video. Lovely images and commentary.

Available from the Episcopal Media Center:
www.episcopalmediacenter.org (online store) or (800) 229-3788 \$29.95 ea.

The Blue Planet

(1990; 42min) VHS format of an IMAX production;

Images from space and diversity of Earth's ecosystems.

Available from amazon.com at a variety of reasonable prices (used).

Affluenza

(1997; 57min) KCTS Television, Seattle;

Highly recommended, a humorous yet hard-hitting critique of consumerism.

May be available from KCTS (800) 937-5387; or go to www.simpleliving.net/resources, which has it in VHS and DVD formats, \$29.95.

God's Creation and Global Warming

(2000; 15min) VHS

Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaign, on the religious, ethical, and moral implications of global warming and the call to people of faith to respond in word and deed.

www.protectingcreation.org or call (202) 481-6928, \$10.

An Inconvenient Truth

(90 min) DVD

Paramount Studios, November 2006

The highly acclaimed and powerful documentary about the reality of global warming, and of Al Gore's work to bring understanding and attention to this urgent issue.

Available at video stores and online.

There is a five-page, faith-based discussion guide for use after viewing this movie.

Available free from Eco-Justice Ministries at www.eco-justice.org

Web sites

www.webofcreation.org

Highly recommended! See especially, Green Congregation Program.

www.earthministry.org

Greening Congregations Handbook; Caring for All Creation modules.

www.nccecojustice.org

The 2005 "God's Earth is Sacred" statement; Earth Day Sunday.

www.seasonofcreation.com

Creation-themed liturgies for four Sundays during Pentecost.

www.eco-justice.org

Eco-Justice Ministries; a variety of materials.

www.theregenerationproject.org

Energy efficiency; Interfaith Power & Light organizations

www.earthcharter.org/files/charter.pdf

The Earth Charter; worthy of consideration

www.uwosh.edu/colleges/cols/clergy_project.htm

The Clergy Letter Project; clergy in support of evolution

Environmental information & issues; advocacy

www.elca.org/advocacy

ELCA Washington Office (formerly LOGA)

www.millenniumassessment.org

UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment

www.worldwatch.org

World Watch Institute (annual State of the World reports)

www.ucsusa.org

Union of Concerned Scientists

www.nrdc.org

Natural Resources Defense Council

www.greenfacts.org

Ecological issues and background

Books

Greening Congregations Handbook

Edited by Tanya Marcovna-Barnett, 2002, Earth Ministry, Seattle (see above in Web sites).

Highly recommended; like a tool-kit of information for how to start and grow a congregational earthkeeping emphasis.

Old Turtle

Douglas Wood, 1992, Pfeifer-Hamilton Publishers.

This is a beautifully illustrated and lyrical children's book, but with a message for all, about who and what and where God is, and the role of humankind. Great theology; could be used as a sermon!

Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder

Richard Louv, 2005, Algonquin Books.

A timely book about the growing separation between people, especially children, and the natural world, and the benefits (mental, physical) to be found in re-connecting with "nature."

Evocations of Grace: Joseph Sittler's Writings on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics

Edited by Steven Bouma-Prediger & Peter Bakken, 2000, Eerdmans.

The late Lutheran ethicist and theologian's key writings on the connection between faith and the Earth; his first essay "A Theology for Earth" came in 1954—important work to rediscover.

Earth Community, Earth Ethics

Larry Rasmussen, 1996, Orbis Books.

This is a modern classic, for anyone who wishes to explore more fully a comprehensive ethical and theological treatment of the need for "sustainable community" and earthkeeping.

The Body of God: An Ecological Theology

Sallie McFague, 1993, Augsburg Fortress.

This is another classic systematic theological perspective on religious and spiritual foundations for earthkeeping.

Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology

Paul Santmire, 2000, Augsburg Fortress.

Also recommended for those interested in further theological exploration of why Christians ought to care for the Earth.

The Whole Shebang: A State of the Universe(s) Report

Timothy Ferris, 1997, Simon & Schuster. Astronomy science and history, written for anyone to read.

The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos: Humanity and the New Story

Brian Swimme, 1996, Orbis Books.

A short, but thought-provoking book, on our place in the universe.

The Dream of the Earth

Thomas Berry, 1990, Sierra Club Books.

Berry, a self-described "geo-logian" plumbs spiritual and historical depths to explore questions of why and how humans have come to live upon such a degraded planet, and what "dream" brings hope for the future. A classic to many environmentalists, referenced in many writings, including by theologians.

The Hand of God: Thoughts and Images Reflecting the Spirit of the Universe

Edited by Michael Reagen, 1999, Lionheart Books, LTD.

A beautiful book with awesome photos from the Hubble Telescope, accompanied by thought-provoking and inspiring commentary by scientists, poets, and theologians.

The Universe Story

Brian Swimme & Thomas Berry, 1992, Harper Collins.

A history of the development of the universe, written as a new "sacred story" that all humankind can share, to inspire awe and to motivate us all to care for the Earth and for one another.

Earth-Wise: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues

Calvin B. DeWitt, 1994, CRC Publications (six-session study guide in book form, 81 pages).

This is a very biblically based exploration of "creation care," with ideas on how to develop a plan for practical actions; somewhat dated, but good, basic information.

Earth Prayers from Around the World

Edited by Elizabeth Roberts & Elias Amidon, 1991, Harper Collins.

An interesting and helpful collection of prayers and blessings, useful for retreats, special worship services, or individual prayer and reflection.

The Book of Creation: An Introduction to Celtic Spirituality

J. Philip Newell, 1999, Paulist Press.

A rich treatise on Celtic spirituality, with suggestions for personal reflection; each chapter is built around one of the "days" of creation.

NOTE: You may wish to check with your synod office or a synodical contact for LENS, the Lutheran Earthkeeping Network of the Synods (see LENS page on the Web of Creation, www.webofcreation.org), to see if you may be able to borrow any of these resources.

In Region 6, you may contact Kim Winchell, Diaconal Minister for Earthkeeping Education, in the North/West Lower Michigan Synod, ELCA: www.mittensynod.org or (517)321-5066.