



## Connecting Faith and Life

volume 16, number 2  
may 9, 2010

### Session at a Glance

While Christians hold different beliefs about ways to address environmental challenges, most agree on the biblical call to good stewardship of God's creation. What can churches do to support and participate in healthy environmental practices?

FAITHLINK is available by subscription via e-mail ([subserves@abingdonpress.com](mailto:subserves@abingdonpress.com)) or by downloading it from the Web ([www.cokesbury.com/faithlink](http://www.cokesbury.com/faithlink)). Print in color or black and white.

**Find us on Facebook.**  
**Follow us on Twitter.**

Copyright © 2010 by Cokesbury. Permission given to copy this page for use in class.



# Greening the Church

by Paul Escamilla and Melissa Lauber

## Growing Green

A core value of United Methodists is growth. This value has several dimensions, among them the compelling work of evangelism by which others come to know Christ in Christian community; spiritual nurture and formation within such faith communities; advocacy for and cultivation of structures of support for just and healthy societies; and expanding our reach to embrace individuals or people groups jeopardized by circumstance or marginalized by the world. United Methodists are people who believe that growth, by which we essentially mean growth in grace, is our fundamental identity and task.

One further dimension of growth emerging prominently for us is the greening of the church. Rebekah Simon-Peter, a United Methodist pastor in Wyoming, wrote *Green Church: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rejoice!* in which she asks, "What does going green really mean, especially for the person of faith? Is it just about changing types of light bulbs, or is there more to it? Is being earth-friendly just a secular movement or a political agenda, or does environmental stewardship have a place in our life with God?"

Recently, the Council of Bishops issued "God's Renewed Creation: A Call to Hope and Action." Bishop Gregory Palmer, president of the Council of Bishops, says the documents contain "our pledges to work in hopeful and robust ways for transforming change as God's stewards of creation. We invite the church and our partners around the world to join us."

We are more aware than ever in history of the increasingly fragile matrix of environmental relationships within which we live and move and have our being. Lately humans have threatened to outgrow our habitat like a river overrunning its banks, uprooting and overturning all manner of things in our surroundings. To grow more green as people of faith may mean something like diminishing, downsizing, lightening our step, or loosening our grip. Greening the church means finding ways to support, encourage, and participate in healthy environmental practices. The call to such stewardship of God's creation is deeply biblical and profoundly Christian.

## Speaking of Nature

Deep in the Hebrew Scriptures lies a reference for understanding growth in environmental awareness as a significant dimension of our faith identity. When King Solomon of Israel is heralded in **1 Kings 4:29-30** for his "very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding," a wisdom surpassing that of "all the people of the

## The Psalms and Creation

**The Psalms** make a natural song-book for greening the church. They are among the most expressive witnesses in the Bible to the centrality of nature and the unity between humanity and creation.

**Psalm 8** begins and ends with an acclamation uniting God and God's creation: "O LORD, our Sovereign, / how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (**verses 1, 9**). The psalmist marvels at the insignificance of the human creature in light of the awesome grandeur of space, yet acknowledges that God has given humans "dominion over the works of your hands" (**verses 4-6**). The words are spoken not with arrogance or opportunism but rather with a clear sense of humility and reverence.

**Psalm 19** declares that the heavens and the earth proclaim God's glory and handiwork day and night. Their witness is silent, but those who are attentive will hear nature's testament to the majesty of the divine.

The centerpiece of **Psalm 36** is an intricate movement drawing the divine, the natural, and the human into a single dance: "Your steadfast love . . . extends to the heavens, / your faithfulness to the clouds. / Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, / your judgments are like the great deep; / you save humans and animals alike" (**verses 5-6**). The interweaving of human, animal, and divine is further unified in the rich metaphor that follows: "All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings" (**verse 7**).

east, and all the wisdom of Egypt," we might assume this wisdom finds its basis in international relations, military strategy, social policy, or perhaps his wisdom as a judge (**1 Kings 3:16-28**).

Instead, we are told that Solomon's wisdom emerges from a less anticipated source: "He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish" (**1 Kings 4:33**). Trees? Birds? Fish? Apparently, the wisdom for which Solomon became a legend, drawing listeners "from all the nations" and "from all the kings of the earth" (**verse 34**) was a wisdom grounded in a mindfulness toward nature.

## Not All About Us

The Creation accounts give central importance to the natural world, something our preoccupation with identifying our own place in these narratives may have prevented us from noticing. In **Genesis 1**, we notice that human responsibility for subduing and having dominion over the earth comes before God grants to humans the appropriation of its yield (**Genesis 1:28-29**). Humankind is first charged with earth's oversight and only then blessed with its provision. Furthermore, when the pronouncement of provision is given, humans apparently have an equal place in the roll call with "every beast of the earth, . . . bird of the air, and . . . everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life" (**verse 30**). Responsibility for the earth's care and cultivation rests specifically with humanity, and enjoyment of its yield is meant to be shared by all its creatures.

In **Genesis 2**, the creation of humans is directly related to the time-tested axiom that necessity is the mother of invention. Before humankind appeared on the scene, a problem existed: "There was no one to till the ground" of the newly fashioned earth (**verse 5**). Enter the human being, created for the express purpose of performing this task: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (**verse 15**). Problem solved! **Verse 7** ties humans closely to the earth. The Hebrew word for man is *'adam*, which is closely related to the word *'adamah*, the word for ground.

According to this narrative sequence, creation was not fashioned for humans, but humans for creation. Such a derivative and subservient identity would take some getting used to for a species that has for millennia understood itself to be the centerpiece of God's handiwork. To suggest that humans were created as mere droids in the service of keeping the lawn green and the hedge trimmed would be overreaching, but a certain humility is born of the discovery that we were invented with a specific task in mind. Reclaiming this awareness serves as a helpful corrective to our historical tendency to environmental preeminence and self-service. If Genesis tells us anything in these two narrative portraits of creation, it may be this: It's not all about us.

## Going Green

In a March article in *Sojourners* magazine, editor Elizabeth Palmberg lists the following suggestions as a starting point for greening a church building:

- ◆ Root everything in faith. Use the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church as a basis.
- ◆ Start small. Recycling is one of the easiest and best-known first steps.
- ◆ Build enthusiasm. The goal is not to change people but rather to get them excited about something.
- ◆ Get an energy audit. This will give you an idea of what steps you can take to get the biggest environmental returns on your investment.
- ◆ Navigate potential resistance. Keep your audience in mind, and avoid using terms that might be seen as divisive.
- ◆ Keep taking it one step further. Draw connections beyond the local level.

*Seven Simple Steps to Green Your Church*, by Rebecca Simon-Peter, offers a practical, step-by-step, ministry-by-ministry approach to green your church over the course of one year. The book begins with a seven-step plan for organizing and implementing programs and offers 12 areas of focus—any one of which would offer a starting point for your congregation: recycling, lighting, worship, electricity and energy efficiency, heating and cooling, water, Christian education, vehicles and travel, the kitchen, the office, missions, and grounds.

## Jesus and the Natural World

The attentiveness toward nature associated with Solomon's wisdom and with the Creation narratives in Genesis also emerges in the person and teachings of Jesus. "Look at the birds of the air," he once preached. A few sentences later, he turned his attention downward: "Consider the lilies of the field" (**Matthew 6:26, 28**).

Jesus' parables speak of seed and soil, weeds and wheat, shrubs and birds, sheep and goats. His teaching about the coming of the Son of Man uses images such as sun and moon, clouds, and fig trees (**Mark 13:24-28**).

Jesus was baptized in a river and driven by the Spirit to fast in the wilderness. He wrote in the dirt and mystified his listeners by speaking of wind that blows where it will, heard but otherwise untraceable (**John 3:8**). He spoke of the fruit of the vine, prayed in one garden, and ultimately was buried in another. Like Solomon's wisdom, Jesus' wisdom was rooted in nature.

## Consumers of Nature Early and Often

Just as Scripture speaks of nature's significance, it also acknowledges a self-serving opportunism toward creation. Adam and Eve's choice to overreach prescribed boundaries and eat the forbidden fruit can be seen, metaphorically, as an exploitation of nature.

The words of the prophet Habakkuk reach backward and forward in time as well as directly into the ear of his contemporary perpetrators: "For the violence done to [the forests of] Lebanon will overwhelm you; / the destruction of the animals will terrify you" (**Habakkuk 2:17**).

Perhaps the most poignant and paradoxical misappropriation of nature is one in which, toward the end of Jesus' ministry, the civil authorities fell a tree that will be used to crucify Jesus.

## The Healing of the Nations

The Bible gives us eyes to see the primacy of nature in sacred story as well as its exploitation in ways that are familiar to its twenty-first-century human inhabitants. It also gives us a view to one thing more: the mercy of God acting to redeem nature and humans, each by means of the other.

Early in the Genesis story, God clothes the shamed and sentenced couple with skins, presumably sacrificing the lives of the creatures originally warmed by those skins for the purpose (**Genesis 3:21**). Isaiah gives voice to the redeeming purpose of God in the vision of a child leading wolf and lamb, leopard and lion in a new sort of Eden, hospitable to all (**Isaiah 11:6-9**).

The apocalyptic vision of the Holy City in **Revelation 21:9-22:7** includes a tree of life, which suggests the tree in Eden exploited by Adam and Eve's overreaching. It echoes the images of the trees pillaged by the Babylonians (**Habakkuk 2:17**), the bush that shaded Jonah through his sulking (**Jonah 4:6**), and the mustard shrub in Jesus' parable in which the

## Greening Church Dinners

Producing and delivering meat to our dinner tables requires the use of significant amounts of energy. In the book *Green Church: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rejoice!* Rebekah Simon-Peter says, “If ten people eat vegetarian meals one day a week [for five weeks], that adds up to 13.5 x 10 x 5 for a total of 675 pounds less carbon dioxide in the group’s carbon footprint. That is the equivalent of driving 675 fewer miles.” She sees an opportunity for churches to significantly reduce their carbon footprint through this simple action.

Consider having a “green” church potluck with beans, grains, pasta, vegetables, fruits, and nuts. If the meal is held during the growing season, consider purchasing locally grown produce, which lessens the amount of carbon emission caused by transporting food over great distances. It also supports local farm economies.

Other possibilities would be to look at the dishes, flatware, and cups you use at church dinners. According to Earth-Resource.org, Styrofoam, a petroleum-based product, poses potential health risks to those who produce and use it. The substance is also difficult to recycle.

Consider serving church dinners on real dishes and eat the meals with real silverware. Invite people to bring their own dishes, a practice that will lessen cleanup time. Consider using cloth napkins. Not only do these practices diminish ill effects on our environment, they enrich the aesthetics of the meal.

birds of the air make their nests (**Matthew 13:31-32**). The leaves of this tree of life, we are told, are for the healing of the nations (**Revelation 22:2**). God’s redeeming power of life moves through all these images.

The church that would grow more green is in one sense already green—its architecture and furnishings, the clothing of its participants, the bread we break, the wine we pour, the holy book from which we read—all of these are infused with creation’s gifts; and all of them silently call us to live more carefully in the garden in which we make our home, the garden that would heal us.

The church is called to see and act upon the wisdom in these gifts and to care for and renew our creation.

## United Methodists and the Environment

John Wesley lived during a time of “open sewers, impure water, unplanned cities, and smoke-filled air. In the mines and mills, squalor and filth were everywhere, as was disease” (*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2008*; page 81). For this reason, he emphasized cleanliness and advocated improvements to the environment, sanitation, and basic health—all of which helped reduce the death rate in England throughout the eighteenth century.

Resolution 1026, “Environmental Stewardship,” supports “measures which will lead to a more careful and efficient use of the resources of the natural world” (page 81). United Methodists are encouraged to examine their patterns of consumption and seek out a simpler and less resource-dependent life.

The resolution states that “natural resources . . . are the common heritage of all humanity, and therefore must be developed and preserved for the benefit of all . . . today and for generations to come.” The church believes that God’s creation is a precious gift “intended to be used for the good of all.”

*Paul Escamilla is associate director of public affairs and adjunct professor of preaching at Perkins School of Theology and an elder in the North Texas Conference.*

*Melissa Lauber lives in Elkridge, Maryland, and is editor of the UMConnection for the Baltimore-Washington Conference.*

**FAITHLINK: Connecting Faith and Life** is a weekly, topical study and an official resource for The United Methodist Church approved by the General Board of Discipleship and published weekly by Cokesbury, The United Methodist Publishing House; 201 Eighth Avenue, South; P.O. Box 801; Nashville, Tennessee 37202-0801. Scripture quotations in this publication, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyrighted © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, and are used by permission. All rights reserved. **Permission is granted to photocopy pages 1–4 of this resource for use in FAITHLINK study groups.** All Web addresses were correct and operational at the time of publication.

Fax **comments** to FAITHLINK, 615-749-6512, or send e-mail to Pamela Dilmore, Lead Editor, [pdilmore@umpublishing.org](mailto:pdilmore@umpublishing.org), or Mickey Frith, Associate Editor, [mfrith@umpublishing.org](mailto:mfrith@umpublishing.org). For **fax problems**, fax FREE to 800-445-8189. For **e-mail problems**, send e-mail to [Cokes\\_Serv@umpublishing.org](mailto:Cokes_Serv@umpublishing.org). To **order**, call 800-672-1789, or visit our website at [www.cokesbury.com/faithlink](http://www.cokesbury.com/faithlink).



## Greening the Church

What can churches  
do to support  
and participate in  
healthy environmental  
practices?

### CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your  
group members and  
your group time,  
choose from among  
the OPEN, EXPLORE,  
and CLOSE activities  
or from "Teaching  
Alternatives" to plan  
the session.

## OPEN the Session

### Pray Together

Pray the following prayer or one of your own: God of all creation, help us to honor your call to care for and renew our creation. Guide us as we explore ways to work with you and with one another to be good stewards of our world; in Christ we pray. Amen.

### Read a Psalm

As mentioned in "The Psalms and Creation" (page 2), the Psalms make a natural songbook for greening the church. To begin your session, invite participants to read from among the following prayers and acclamations found in Psalms 8; 36:5-10; 84:1-7; and 145:13-21.

## EXPLORE the Topic

### Talk About "Growing Green"

Review highlights of "Growing Green" (page 1). If you have time and equipment, you may print out and review highlights of "God's Renewed Creation: A Call to Hope and Action," the statement from the United Methodist Council of Bishops (<http://tiny.cc/7dghe>).

Ask: What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase *greening the church*? How do you respond to the questions asked by Rebekah Simon-Peter? What possibilities do you see in the church's increasing involvement in caring for the environment?

### Consider Solomon's Wisdom

Invite a participant to read the description of King Solomon's wisdom in 1 Kings 4:29-30. Review highlights of "Speaking of Nature" (pages 1-2). Then invite a participant to read 1 Kings 4:33-34.

Ask: Have you ever thought of wisdom as derived from knowledge of nature? In what ways does such an idea apply to our contemporary situation regarding the environment?

### Discuss "Not All About Us"

Review highlights of "Not All About Us" (page 2). Invite a participant to read Genesis 1:26-28. Encourage the group to listen or follow along in their Bibles as the passage is read, with this question in mind: Where do you hear human responsibility in the text?

Explain that the word *dominion* (verse 28) means something akin to "stewardship," or caring for something belonging to another. Ask for an example of a time when someone has been charged with caring for a friend's house during an absence. What about their pets? their children? What different feelings do you experience when an infant is placed into your arms? Is there any correlation between such feelings and those of being charged with caring for the earth?

Invite a participant to read Genesis 1:29-30. Ask the group to identify similarities in the ways provision is presented to humans (verse 29) as compared to the animals (verse 30). What are the differences? Are there more similarities or differences?

Invite a volunteer to read Genesis 2:4b-5. Encourage the group to listen for a stated problem or absence of resolution in the story. Invite the reader to continue reading Genesis 2:6-7, then verse 15. Ask the group to identify the purpose for which the man was created.

Ask: Have you ever thought about people being created for the purpose of taking care of the earth? How do you feel about such an idea? How do you see the relationship between humans and creation revealed in these accounts in Genesis?

### Explore “Jesus and the Natural World”

Review “Jesus and the Natural World” (page 3). Read the following Scriptures: Matthew 12:11; 13:1-9; 13:31-32; Mark 13:24-31; Luke 6:43-45; and John 3:8. Ask: What images from nature are in these Scriptures? What connections do you make between these Scriptures and greening the church?

### Explore United Methodist Resources

Review “United Methodists and the Environment” (page 4). Ask: How do you respond to these views about the environment? What steps can we as individuals and as a church take that will help us seek a simpler and less resource-dependent way of life?

### Make a Plan to Green the Church

Review “Going Green” (page 3). Discuss what it would mean for the group to initiate such a six-step process. The fifth step is “Navigate potential resistance.” Invite the group to identify and process the various concerns or reservations of those expressing such doubts.

Review the information about *Seven Simple Steps to Green Your Church* in the same section. Ask: Which of the areas of focus suggested might we consider looking at in our church? As a group, decide on a plan of action. Take your ideas to the administrative council or other ministry group in your church.

## CLOSE the Session

### Pray Together

Lead the group in a “bidding prayer,” in which a phrase you offer is followed by silence or by participants offering individual phrases to follow the leading phrase:

Creator God,

Hear us as we offer thanks for the gift of the earth and all living things . . .

Hear us as we confess our misuse and negligence of the earth you have given us to guard and protect as stewards . . .

Hear us as we acknowledge that sometimes convenience has been more important to us than conservation . . .

Give us wisdom to see the beauty of the natural world and our need for greater care of and respect toward it. Grant us courage to raise difficult questions and guidance to know how to act thoughtfully and responsibly, all to your glory. Amen.

## Teaching Alternatives

Consider doing a church-wide green study based on Rebekah Simon-Peter’s book *Green Church: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rejoice!* You can find resources and leader guides for all ages by going to [Cokesbury.com](http://Cokesbury.com) and doing a keyword search for “green church.”

Plan to host a church dinner using the ideas suggested in “Greening Church Dinners” (page 4).

### Next Week in FAITHLINK

## Social Justice and Christian Faith

Social justice is a key biblical theme and has been an important feature of the Methodist movement from its beginning. What do the Bible and Wesleyan tradition teach us about social justice? How are Christians called to practice social justice?