

Growing Earth Care in Your Congregation
A Brief Guide from the Earth Care Workshop
Presbytery of the Peaks, Feb. 15, 2020

In what ways is the Church in a unique position to address the nurture and care of the earth?

- Our reasons for doing so are based at their core on a biblical understanding of God's incarnate presence in all parts of creation, rather than on fear or on political beliefs. We understand that God made the earth and all that is in it, and pronounced it good. The interdependencies inherent in life on earth are God's design.
- Christians understand our relationship to the created world to be as that of caretakers, or stewards. In Genesis 1 and 2, before any other command is given, God asks the newly created humans to take responsibility for the earth, to "keep" and preserve the garden.
- Christians are compelled to address the needs of "the least of these." Since human-caused climate change unjustly affects the poor and dispossessed disproportionately to those privileged people who are most responsible, we are called to mitigate those effects to the best of our ability as an issue of justice.
- The Church, as a place where we are bound together as a community, enables us to support each other in hope as we seek to make a difference, despite a sense of loss and news that can be overwhelming. If ever a group was well situated to help people deal with the fear and the grief of loss, helping them to nonetheless be empowered by hope, it should be the church. We can support each other as we try to make a difference.
- As a faith community, we can be a model in the larger community and a witness to the faith we profess by taking visible concrete actions that express what we believe about creation and our role in caring for it. By working together, our impact can be much greater than if we act alone.

PCUSA statement on Creation Care first made 30 years ago and reaffirmed in 2010

"We recognize and accept (that) restoring creation (is) a central concern of the church, to be incorporated into its life and mission at every level, with major implications for infusion into theological work, evangelism, education, justice and peacemaking, worship and liturgy, public witness, global mission and congregational service, and action at the community level."

--General Assembly PCUSA 1990

Strategies

What we have learned from our experience and what we did right. Many of these ideas are our adaptations of ideas from the Training Manual for the Green Congregation program.

You are not alone. Congregational efforts are part of a larger movement to incorporate care of creation into the life and mission of the church. There are probably many people in your congregation who will be supportive. There are many denominational and inter-denominational programs to connect to and receive guidance from.

It only takes a few people. A pastor, or a lay leader or any interested parishioner can get the ball rolling. Seek out others in the community/congregation who are interested in the issues of earth care and who are interested in offering some leadership with you. You only need a small group of folks who are willing to grasp a vision and to stay at it for a while. You can set up a formal committee or an informal task force, or you can work through an already existing committee that deals with concerns that are related to eco-justice. We set up a landscaping task force early on, and then an ad hoc team after our main goal was added to the congregational mission statement.

Get authorized. Be open about what you are planning. Speak with the pastor/s and communicate with the Session, seeking their blessing and or authorization to proceed. Let your activities be known to the whole community. You may be amazed at how much support you get once people know what you are doing. In our case, we started getting encouragement and positive feedback from the very beginning. That gave and gives us a lot of energy and motivation to keep going.

Give it a name. Give a name to your endeavor or identity. People will respond to a name and remember what your congregation is doing. You can name your entire congregation (such as Care for Creation Congregation) or you may choose to name the committee (Green Team, Creation Care Team) something that reflects the idea that it is not a committee as much as a catalyst and leaven for all the congregational programs.

Begin by finding what is good. Do a survey, as we did, of what is happening already and what individuals are already doing on their own and celebrate that! Work from encouragement rather than discouragement.

Start with what is possible. It is easy to be overwhelmed with all that could be done. Begin by choosing projects that have a good chance of being manageable and coming to fruition. Celebrate each success, and you will find that as you gain support and interest, more ambitious projects become possible. We started with 2 projects – putting paper-recycling bins on every floor and near the choir room and other places where waste paper is being generated, and collecting for composting all paper and food waste through a company in Floyd. The first project was easy to pull off, and quickly became standard practice. The second project collapsed when the company in Floyd suddenly closed. However, we had already publicized about it and the energy we had generated in support of that project was relatively easy to transfer to something else.

Serve as leaven for the entire congregation and all it does. The purpose of an earth care group is not to do all the creation care activities but to be a catalyst in leading the individuals and groups of the congregation in making all their actions more earth-friendly. The earth care group seeks to help creation care become part of the ethos of the entire life of the congregation.

Use already existing assets and opportunities. Work with programs that already exist such as weekday children's programs, or Sunday School or community ministry programs or worship, and add an earth care component or educational piece. Incorporate care for creation in what you already do. Use the gifts of your group. When we did an Earth Day Fair, we based our centers on the interests of the people on our team.

Regularize it. If you make a change, such as putting out recycling bins for paper or for container recycling in the church kitchen, or if you decide to purchase green cleaning products, or to celebrate a Season of Creation in

Worship, if it receives support, make it standard procedure quickly, so it won't have to be suggested again year after year. Develop patterns that can be repeated.

Keep the congregation's attention focused on care for creation. Make it part of the atmosphere! Write newsletter articles, put green notes in the worship bulletin, put up displays or bulletin boards, however your congregation communicates.

Balance your actions among all aspects of church life: worship, education, buildings and grounds, public ministry/outreach beyond your own congregation. Some churches also include earth care discipleship at home and at work.

Seek certification and formalization when the time is right. Wait until you have successes that you can document as you begin the certification process. Begin by doing what gives your energy, and save goal setting until you feel more established and need to organize your work. This includes formalizing a budget. At the beginning, we took on projects that did not require extra funding, or could be absorbed by the education or worship or building and grounds committee, or, in some cases, we spent money out of our own pockets for small, but important expenses.

Go outside. Being close to nature is crucial. We will not save what we do not love!

Act out of gratitude and grace. It is natural to be motivated by fear or grief or guilt or outrage, but those responses won't sustain efforts in the long run. We seek our motivation out of the deep reservoir of God's grace present in nature itself. Despair, Al Gore says, "is simply another form of denial" and serves to paralyze our will, or as Norman Wirzba points out, "it signals that the world and its inhabitants are not worthy of our care." "Are we prepared," he says, "to love God by loving the world brought into being and daily maintained by God's love?" We regularly begin our team meetings with an inspirational quote or thought to center everyone on our larger purpose. Also, when we report facts about earth care to the congregation, we try to focus more on the difference people can make if they make a change, than on the harm caused by what people are currently doing.

Approaches/Starting Places:

- Brainstorming: what are the possible ideas? Then narrow it down to projects with the greatest chance of success
- Learning: what forums and classes can be used as an entry to get folks interested in taking action?
- Needs or Crises: what need or crisis is at the forefront in your community or your state?
- Opportunity-Based: what opportunity is currently arising? Is your youth group looking for a service project? Are you doing a renovation or a garden that could address ecological concerns?
- Congregational Assets: what can people do in hobbies or in their jobs? What are people already doing?
- Consensus: research possibilities and survey the church members to see what people are most interested in
- Join Forces: What other organization, church or group can we work with?

What is an Earth Care Congregation?

A church that commits to the Earth Care Pledge and

Completes actions in four categories derived from the Pledge: (must have 25 points in each category)

- Worship
- Education
- Facilities
- Outreach beyond your own church