

Earth Ministry

**Ideas for
Serving Christ**

by

Caring for Creation

in

A Season of Creation

**Guidelines
for
Groups and Congregations**

Earth Ministry Ideas

Guidelines for Reflection and Practical Ministry

A Season of Creation provides us with an opportunity to connect with Earth as our home and the creatures of Earth as our kin through an Earth ministry as well as through a season of worship. Earth ministry refers to the many ways we can care for creation and express our love for God's Earth. Earth has long nurtured us. Now we are called to nurture Earth in the face of environmental crises.

Genesis 2:15 refers to a role assigned to our primal parents in Eden, our first garden home. Planet Earth is the garden home we have inherited. God placed Adam in the garden to "till and keep it." This is according to an older translation. The Hebrew word translated "till" more correctly means "to serve." The Hebrew word translated "keep" more correctly means "preserve." Our role, like that of our first parents, is to serve and to care for Earth as our God-given home.

Earth, however, is also a sanctuary of God's presence. Part of ministry is to be conscious not only of the mysterious world that we must protect, but also of God's presence in this place. The suggestions that follow for Earth ministry, therefore, include both reflective as well as practical activities designed to assist us in serving and protecting our garden planet with practical love and spiritual awareness.

To facilitate the practical aspects of an Earth ministry, it may be wise to create an Earth Ministry Team involving both young and older groups of people committed to caring for creation. These teams may wish to focus on one or two of the suggested environmental projects in a given year and pursue another during subsequent years.

There are a number of fine resources that congregations or individuals may use. One of the most user-friendly of these is *Eco-Church. An Action Manual* by Albert Fritsch and Angela Iadavaia-Cox (San Jose: Resource Publications, 1992).

Another useful workbook is *Greening Congregations Handbook* edited by Tanya Marcovna Barnett (Seattle: Earth Ministry, 2002).

For additional reflective exercises we recommend *Sparks of the Cosmos. Rituals for Seasonal Use* by Margie Abbott RSM (Unley SA: MediaCom Education, 2001) and *Seven Songs of Creation* by Norman Habel (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004).

For further resources, contact www.webofcreation.org under the "Links to Other Organizations" and the section on "Getting Started" under the Green Congregation Program.

First Sunday in Creation: Forest Sunday

Connecting with Creation: Listening to the Forest

The forest and the hills are ideal places to feel immersed in the mysteries of creation. The exercise for the first Sunday focuses on listening in a forest or a hill country area.

Enter a cluster of trees or dense vegetation and remain silent. Listen! Perhaps close your eyes.

As you listen, become conscious of more and more sounds, especially the soft sounds arising in the forest. Name them in your mind and heart. There may be sounds of breezes in the treetops, birds, insects, or sounds of the place itself—perhaps even the sounds of silence.

Become aware that these are the sounds of life from a myriad of living things around you. You are overhearing a symphony of life.

There are also sounds that are too soft for you to hear—the fluttering wings of moths, the beating of hearts in tiny animals, and the breathing of trees as they emit oxygen. Imagine them in your mind's ear.

Yet all of these sounds together combine in a chorus of praise—not like a human choir but a symphony of living sounds from creation. Listen to the forest as the Psalmist once did: “All the trees of the forest sing for joy” (Psalm 96:12).

As you grow in awareness you may wish to join in the chorus of the forest and add a human voice. Begin, perhaps, by whispering a prayer of thanksgiving to the “God who is above all, and through all, and in all” (Ephesians 4:6).

Beyond all the sounds, the songs, and the music of the forests there is another voice, the silent word of God. For God's word is the deep impulse that created diverse life forms in the beginning and continues to create in the forest.

Listen, as Elijah at Mt Horeb, to the still small voice of God stirring life through the forest. Be still yourself and hear the voice of God in that place.

Ministering to Earth as a Church: Trees

Tree planting is one of the most effective ways of reversing the process of forest destruction and land clearance that has destroyed a major portion of “the lungs of our planet.”

One plan is to locate a piece of land—either one belonging to a member of the congregation or a sympathetic neighbor or the local government—and designate it as a forest garden of the congregation. Each year during a Season of Creation—and perhaps at other times—native trees are planted on this property as a way of rejuvenating the land and encouraging a revival of the native fauna and flora.

Advice on the best ways of restoring the native life of the region should be combined with an educational plan to educate the children and youth of the congregation to ways of helping Earth to be healed by tree planting. Young trees may be blessed in worship before planting.

Caring for Earth at Home: Garden

Individual members may wish to reflect on whether they need a lawn that has to be mowed on a regular basis and sometimes seems to require heavy doses of chemical fertilizer, or whether they might re-plant the lawn areas with native trees, shrubs, or grasses that need less care or watering. Native flora can facilitate the return of native animal and bird life.

The time has come also for families planning to build or extend their homes to ask whether the timber they are using is “certified wood” and not from an endangered native forest.

Networking for Earth: Forests

Earth Ministry teams may want to use Arbor Day, a nationally-celebrated observance at the end of April, as an opportunity to plant trees on their property or in their community. For possible activities and programs, see www.arborday.org. There you can also order the book *Urban and Community Forestry: A Practical Guide to Sustainability*. For further ideas, see www.nationaltreetrust.org.

Check out the many resources identified at www.treelink.org. An excellent guide is *The Simple Act of Planting a Tree: A Citizen Forester’s Guide to Healing Your Neighborhood, Your City, and Your World* (1990) by Tree People with Andy and Katie Lipkis.

To advocate for the preservation of forests, see the Woodwise Program at the Coop America site: www.coopamerica.org.

Second Sunday in Creation: Land Sunday

Connecting with Creation: Feeling at Home

Earth is our planet home, the place chosen for us to live with God, our sacred site in all creation. The task is to find rites and forms of meditation that help us to connect with Earth and experience it as a true home rather than a stop-over en route to heaven and as a way of anticipating our eternal home in God's "new heaven and new earth" (Revelation 21:1). Already, even now, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1).

One spiritual exercise that can prove meaningful to some involves taking a trip into the country and finding a hill that has a view of the countryside. Select a space on the hill that can become sacred for this occasion and perhaps other occasions. A circle of rocks, soil, or plants may be formed to represent a sacred center on the hill. Participants may also wish to take some rosemary, a leaf of any plant or some other symbol to help stir memories of past connections with Earth, our God-given home.

From this site participants name all they can see that belongs to their home—various kinds of trees, plants, wildflowers, birds, hills, rocks, clouds, and animals. Memories associated with any of these may be told to strengthen the feeling of being at home. We each ask ourselves, "How am I connected with the land at my feet or the living creatures I see around me?"

Clearly great respect for the land is encouraged by scripture. In the seventh, sabbatical year, the land is to rest, just as humans are to rest on the Sabbath. In the forty-ninth year, the land is to be returned to the families of the original owners. These provisions are rooted in the understanding of the land as an integral part of God's creation. "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land" (Leviticus 25:23–24).

A closing rite may involve participants running their hands through the soil or sand that is in the circle in order to make the connection tangible. As they do, they may wish to repeat the words of Psalm 139: "I was made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of earth." Some of the soil from the Earth bowl used in the suggested church liturgy for the Second Sunday in A Season of Creation may be used for this ritual.

Reflecting on this verse and our home called Earth can lead participants to express their faith and their feelings about God's presence pulsing in the very soil of the place with which they are connecting.

Ministering to Earth as a Church: Land

One project for the Earth ministry team of the congregation might be to locate a piece of degraded land and work towards its restoration by natural processes. The Earth Ministry team might want to plan an event on National Public Lands Day (September 24th this year and annually planned for one Saturday in September). There is a network of events—trail maintenance, tree plantings, etc.—nationwide that is searchable by location on the National Public Lands Day website at www.npld.com/involved/. Or teams can plan their own event using the resources provided on the site. Contact Christine Hoekenga, NCC Public Lands Initiative (202-544-2350) for more information.

Minimizing waste is an important task that is urgently needed in our affluent throw-away society. Restoring degraded and abused land is another urgent task before us.

Another option is to create a team of volunteers who will collect biodegradable materials—cuttings, weeds, branches—from the homes of families as means to begin a congregational compost center that will eventually provide healthy compost for gardens in the community. Some youth groups already play this role as part of their ministry.

Some congregations may wish to consider landscaping around their church in such a way as to save the water from the roof and driveways as means to enable native gardens to be grown that encourage the return of natural species.

One small rural congregation decided to remove the front of the Church and replace it with glass, including glass doors opening onto a native garden. In the cold seasons worshippers have a sense of the presence of creation as they worship; and in warm seasons they can process through the glass doors to worship with Christ in creation. Other congregations have gardens with waterfalls that can be seen through a window behind the altar.

Congregations that are building new sanctuaries will surely want to explore how to construct centrally located baptismal pools with living water and borders of plants and flowers. Other congregations may want to create memorial gardens as signs of living hope.

Caring for Earth at Home: Garden

It is important to provide a simple guide for families at home to help them minimize their waste. This may involve following a clear pattern for recycling all

bottles, cans, plastic, and paper, as well as creating effective composting for the lawn and food waste.

Caring for the garden as sacred soil also involves avoiding the use of destructive chemicals and fertilizers and using compost to encourage the return of worms and other healthy bio-organisms to the soil.

Networking for Earth

The National Council of Churches has a new Public Lands Stewardship Initiative to encourage active stewardship and protection of God's sacred lands at www.nccecojustice.org under "Lands."

A valuable contact for information supporting organizations interested in food is *The National Committee for World Food Day*, 1001 22nd St, N.W. Washington D.C. 20437. Phone: (202) 653-2404.

The Earth Ministry Committee may get some ideas for hands-on projects from the Chicago-based Openlands Project at www.openlands.org. Another helpful organization is The Nature Conservancy at www.nature.org.

Third Sunday in Creation: Wilderness Sunday

Connecting with Creation: Hearing the Groans

When we think of the wilderness we tend to connect with the wild, the desert, the mountains, or the vast expanses of the ocean depths, far from the so-called civilized domains of Earth. We also tend to think of the wilderness as vast areas of rugged landscape with seemingly few forms of life.

The wilderness is just as alive with teeming creatures as our agricultural areas and river basins. And the wilderness is just as vulnerable to the destructive forces at work in the cities of our planet. Especially destructive are the long-term outcomes of the greenhouse effect and the holes in the ozone layer. Even wild worlds that we may never see are threatened by these abuses of our planet.

Another abuse that threatens wilderness on a large scale is energy and mineral development, such as drilling for oil and gas. Even the wilderness areas on our public lands, which we have agreed as a society to protect—such as National Monuments, National Forests, and Conservation Areas—is pierced by drilling rigs, snaked with roads, and polluted by run-off from mines.

Most governments have refused to take action to limit the use of fossil fuels, reduce global warming, eliminate pollutants that deplete the ozone layer, and stop the poisoning of the land with radioactive waste. Within fifty years, the climate of

the planet will change radically unless something is done to change the way we use energy resources. Yet, for questionable economic reasons, we have stubbornly clung to fossil fuels and been short-sighted in our refusal seriously to implement cleaner energy alternatives. Kicking our fossil fuel habit and investing in cleaner renewable sources would be good for our economies, communities, and wilderness areas in the long run.

One of the ways of connecting with Earth as creation groaning under the weight of human abuses is to visit a desecrated site or a location that has been denuded and defiled. Potential locations include a piece of land where vegetation is dying because of salination, where micro forms of life are dying due to radioactive residue and waste or where fauna is dying because of air pollutants or where the land has been torn up and species disrupted by energy development such as drilling rigs or pipelines. This is a piece of land where Earth is suffering.

We may not be very sensitive to the anguish of Earth. Yet we are invited to hear creation groaning. The group may first sit in silence and hear the impact of that silence—the silence of soil and species that have lost their voices. Often the Earth suffers the most where poor and marginalized people live, because they have been made the dumping grounds for the wastes of the affluent. These places voice a different kind of silence, the often inaudible sounds of human oppression.

One way of becoming more sensitive to environmental injustices is for members of the group to speak for Earth and for the poor. Each participant may begin with lines such as:

“I feel the salt rising through my flesh and burning my skin...”
“I am sad when the voice of the tree frog disappears...”
“My soul burns when nuclear waste is dumped within me...”
“My spirit weeps when the ozone layer cannot protect my family...”
“I groan because of the toxins in the drinking water of the poor.”

We need to remember also that the groaning of Earth is not a pathetic hopeless cry. Earth’s groaning anticipates a day when these curses will be removed and the planet will be healed and restored to life. So the participants may continue:

“I groan because I hope that soon...”
“I groan like a mother with birth pangs as I wait for...”
“I groan with God’s spirit in anticipation of a restored creation where...”
“I groan with humans sensitive to the day when...”

The group may wish to close with the final verse of the “Song of Healing” (*Habel Hymns One*):

Healing is rising, free in Christ’s body,
Healing is flowing, free with Christ’s blood

May this deep healing pulse through our bodies,
Heal the world's wounds still bleeding and red.
Melody: Morning Has Broken

Ministering to Earth as a Church: Energy

The Earth ministry team may wish to consider an environmental audit for its church to ascertain the amount of gas, electricity, paper, and water used by the congregation.

For information about the concept of “Ecological Footprint” and tips about reducing your personal or community footprint, see www.myfootprint.org/. Redefining Progress, The Earthday Network, and the New Community Project offer individuals a chance to evaluate their personal ecological footprint.

An energy audit can be performed by monitoring gas and electricity meters and ascertaining ways in which energy usage may be reduced. The option of turning to solar power, wind power, or some other renewable form of energy could also be considered.

Perhaps the most obvious abuses of energy are the fossil fuels burned when driving, including driving to church. Worshippers may wish to consider sharing cars, taking public transportation, or walking when weather permits.

Caring for Earth at Home: Energy

Families may also wish to conduct an energy audit in their homes to check the level of gas and electricity used each month. Solar energy offers a positive alternative in some locations.

Networking for Earth: Energy

Contact ICE (Interfaith Coalition on Energy) at 7217 Oak Road, Melrose Park, PA. Phone: (215) 632 1122. This organization has energy activities for youth and for congregations.

The new Public Lands Stewardship Initiative at the National Council of Churches works to safeguard wilderness on our public lands as part of the good stewardship of creation. Consult www.nccecojustice.org under “Lands.” Or contact Christine Hoekenga, NCC Public Lands Initiative, at 202-544-2350 for more information.

Congregational Earth ministry teams may also wish to link up with organizations such as The Wilderness Society at www.wilderness.org.

Fourth Sunday in Creation: River Sunday

Connecting with Creation: Walking in Water

We begin our life suspended in the water of our mother's womb. Seventy percent of our bodies is water. In baptism we are again born of water and the Spirit. All the water on Earth is recycled. Ultimately we feel the same raindrops that fell on Moses and Jesus. We waded in the waters of life from conception to burial. Then in God's eternal new creation, we are blessed by the "water of life" (Revelation 21:6).

How do we become aware of the spiritual dimension of water? We survive because of the waters of life, every day. Yet we are often oblivious to this life force within us and around us—God present in the waters of life.

One exercise that may increase our spiritual awareness of the power of water in our lives is to visit a local stream or river at a chosen place, where we stand in the water as a group. As the water washes over our feet we reflect first on the sources of the water flowing around us—springs, rain, clouds, oceans, the moist breath of God. Some may wish to plan a ritual of baptismal renewal, invoking the riches of the great baptismal prayers in the liturgy.

We then reflect on the water within us—water we breathe, taste, and drink to stay alive—and we reflect on the water that is the gift of our salvation.

Thereafter we may reflect on the journey of the water after it flows downstream and into lakes, seas, and oceans. Part of that reflection may include the mystery of life in the water, both in the rivers and in the seas. There are many more species of life deep in the ocean than there are on land. We may also consider how the clear waters of life are so quickly polluted with garbage, toxic chemicals, and human waste.

A simple rite of renewal is to take a small branch, dip it in the water, and sprinkle it over the heads of the participants, who all share birth by water and the Spirit. The key to this awareness experience is to recall not only our baptism but also to remember that when God became a human being God was also born of water and continues to be a living presence in water.

The group may also wish to reflect on the closing words of "The Song of Waters" (*Habel Hymns One*):

Feel the breath of God move softly
Gentle mists across the skin;
Earth is breathing God's own spirit,
Life renewed from deep within.
Sing a song of living waters,

Pulsing through the veins of Earth.

Melody: Praise my Soul the King of Heaven

Ministering to Earth as a Church: Water

Preserving and restoring our waterways is a vital task of the future. Some of these waterways are well known but others may be hidden from our sight.

A valuable project of the Earth ministry team would be to locate and map the various waterways of the area. This would include known streams as well as drains, underground systems, and sewerage pipes. The task would involve determining whether these waterways empty into lakes, seas, or oceans or are recycled for future use.

Once the total picture is clear, the team could work with experts to plan ways of cleaning up, rescuing, and recycling the precious water of the area.

A related project involves finding ways of saving the waters that flow from the roof of the church or the parking lots used by the church. The church could provide a model of how to save God's precious gift of water.

Another exciting option is for the Earth ministry team to create a wetland area among the trees being planted as part of the program for the first Sunday in the Season of Creation. Wetlands are a vital means of restoring creatures like frogs, turtles and water birds to the area.

Caring for Earth at Home: Water

A number of water-saving devices in the home are now well known. These include installing half-flush toilets, changing the watering system of the garden to avoid wasteful sprinklers, and adding rainwater tanks that store the water flowing from the roof.

Just as important is to monitor any activities, such as car-washing, that might channel pollutants into the drainage system of the area.

Those interested in doing a free household water audit may wish to contact their local water management authority or do one on line by going to “water savings” on the Australian site http://www.yvw.com.au/corp_index.html.

General Electronic Resources

Christians Respecting Earth and the Environment

<http://www.uq.net.au/cjpc/create.htm>

Eco Justice Ministries

<http://www.eco-justice.org>

Web of Creation

<http://www.webofcreation.org/>

World Council of Churches – Ecumenical Earth

<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/ecology.html>

A Rocha (Christians in Conservation)

<http://www.arocha.org/>

North American Coalition for Christianity and Ecology

<http://www.nacce.org/>