

Stewards of creation

Lord of heaven and earth

Genesis 2:15; Leviticus 25:23; Psalm 24:1

Earth facts

- The United States releases 25 percent of the world's carbon dioxide.
- From 1975 – 2000, new houses in the United States grew 38 percent bigger despite having fewer people in each household, on average.
- Lack of safe water and sanitation is the world's largest cause of illness. (*Creation Care: Keepers of the Earth*, Luke Gascho)

Care of creation and Christian discipleship

What level of importance should we give to the subject of caring for the Earth? Chances are, responses will vary widely, but ask this question in church and you may hear comments such as:

- Isn't this topic a result of New Age influences on the church?
- Would Jesus drive an SUV?
- Didn't God say the Earth is here for us to use and have dominion over?
- Much of the electricity we use in our country comes from coal, so are we really making a difference by driving hybrid cars? Besides, my car is paid for.
- With all the tree huggers and secular green organizations, shouldn't we be careful about being "unevenly yoked" to organizations that have no faith perspective at all when they address this issue?
- How can you claim to be a steward of creation if you hunt for sport?

Let's not gloss over these questions, but let's keep them in mind as we consider Scripture and our relationship to this cosmic rock hurtling through space we call home, along with 6 billion other people. Take some time to review the following statement from the 1995 *Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective*. Test Scripture and allow it to create the framework for your conversation. Read each paragraph along with the text on which it is based.



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Creation care and the Mennonite confession of faith

In 1995 the *Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective* was adopted for use within the church. Since then, many congregations have used this resource as a way of preparing people for membership in our congregations. Read together Article 5 on Creation and Divine Providence and review the related Scripture as desired when you discuss this aspect of faith.

Article 5. Creation and Divine Providence

We believe that God has created the heavens and the Earth and all that is in them, [1] and that God preserves and renews what has been made. All creation ultimately has its source outside itself and belongs to the Creator. The world has been created good because God is good and provides all that is needed for life. [2]

We believe that the universe has been called into being as an expression of God's love and sovereign freedom alone. Creation witnesses to the eternal power and divine nature of God, who gives meaning and purpose to life and who alone is worthy of worship and praise. [3] We acknowledge that God sustains creation in both continuity and change. We believe that God upholds order in creation and limits the forces of sin and evil for the sake of preserving and renewing humanity and the world. [4]

God also works to save human beings and the world from death and destruction and to overcome the forces of sin and evil. We therefore are called to respect the natural order of creation and to entrust ourselves to God's care and keeping, whether in adversity or plenty. Neither the work of human hands, nor the forces of the natural world around us, nor the power of the nations among which we live are worthy of the trust and honor due the Creator on whom they depend. [5]

[1] Genesis 1:1; Isaiah 45:11f; John 1:3.

[2] Genesis 1:31; 1 Timothy 4:4.

[3] Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:19-23.

[4] Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 104; Ephesians 3:9-11.

[5] Psalm 33; Matthew 6:25-33; Matthew 10:26-31.

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- Were you aware that this statement was part of our Confession of Faith?
- What about this statement do you agree or disagree with?
- Do you consider the care and stewardship of creation an extension of our witness in today's world? Why or why not?

What is your ecological footprint?

We have all heard or read about the disparity between the use of energy and the level of consumption in industrial nations as compared to third-world countries. Below is an exercise to bring the statistics a little closer to home. Take a few minutes to fill this out and report back to each other how you scored. This assessment was developed by New Community Project, which is a faith-based organization concerned with issues of caring for creation.

A lifestyle assessment tool from the New Community Project

An "ecological footprint" is the amount of the Earth's productive capacity that a person uses to meet his or her consumption patterns. If the world's productive area were divided evenly among the world's 6-plus billion people, there would be about 4.5 acres per person. Currently, the footprint of the average person in the world is around 5.1 acres, meaning we're already over budget as a human family.

But it gets worse: more than 50 of the poorest countries in the world have a per capita footprint significantly below five acres, while North Americans (not including Mexico) draw on an average 23.7 acres per person. Here's another way to look at it: If all the world's people lived like we do, we'd need four more planets to provide for us.

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Let's get started on calculating your ecological footprint!

Ecological footprint calculation

1. How many people are in your household? **Points** _____
 - 1 (30 points)
 - 2 (25 points)
 - 3 (20 points)
 - 4 (15 points)
 - 5 (10 points)
 - 6+ (5 points)

2. How is your home heated? **Points** _____
 - Natural Gas (30 points)
 - Electricity (40 points)
 - Oil (50 points)
 - Renewable (0 points)

3. What is the setting of your hot water heater? **Points** _____
 - Vacation (5 points)
 - Warm (10 points)
 - Hot (20 points)
 - Don't know (25 points)

4. At how many meals per week do you eat meat or shrimp? **Points** _____
 - 0 (0 points)
 - 1-3 (10 points)
 - 4-6 (30 points)
 - 7-10 (45 points)
 - 11+ (60 points)

5. How many homemade meals do you eat per week (include packed lunches, etc.)? **Points** _____
 - Under 10 (25 points)
 - 10-14 (20 points)
 - 15-18 (15 points)
 - 18+ (10 points)

6. Do you purchase locally grown food items? **Points** _____
 - Most of the time (20 points)
 - Sometimes (30 points)
 - Rarely (40 points)
 - I grow my own vegetables (subtract 5 points from total)

7. Do you buy organic foods? **Points** _____
 - Mostly (0 points)
 - Rarely (20 points)

8. If you or your family own vehicles, what type are they (add points for each vehicle)? **Points** _____
- Hybrid (10 points)
 - Motorcycle (20 points)
 - Compact (35 points)
 - Mid-sized (60 points)
 - Small pickup (70 points)
 - Minivan or van, SUV (100 points)
 - Pickup (130 points)
9. How do you get to school/work? **Points** _____
- Car (50 points)
 - Public transit (25 points)
 - School bus (20 points)
 - Walk (0 points)
 - Bike/skates (0 points)
10. How many daily car trips does your household take? **Points** _____
- None (0 points)
 - 1-2 (10 points)
 - 3-4 (20 points)
 - 5+ (30 points)
11. How many energy-efficient features are in your home (low-flow shower head, low-flush toilet, compact florescent light bulbs, Energy Star appliances, insulation around water heater, etc.)? **Points** _____
- 0 (40 points)
 - 1-3 (25 points)
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12. Does your household try to reduce the amount of waste and toxins in the house (buying bulk food, reusing containers, natural cleaners, etc.)? **Points** _____
- Most of the time (0 points)
 - Sometimes (10 points)
 - Rarely (20 points)
 - Never (30 points)
13. Does your household compost? **Points** _____
- Most of the time (0 points)
 - Sometimes (5 points)
 - Never (15 points)
14. Does your household recycle newspapers, aluminum, glass and plastics? **Points** _____
- Most of the time (5 points)
 - Sometimes (10 points)
 - Rarely (15 points)
 - Never (20 points)

15. How many garbage bags of waste do you set out for pick up weekly? **Points** _____

0 (0 points)

½ (5 points)

1 (10 points)

2 (20 points)

16. How many bottled beverages do you drink per week? **Points** _____

0 (0 points)

1-3 (5 points)

4+ (10 points)

17. Regarding lawn care, you use: **Points** _____

Nonmotorized mower (0 points)

Electric mower (10 points)

Gas-powered push mower (15 points)

Riding mower (20 points)

and (add to total)

Pesticides/fertilizer (10 points)

Frequent irrigation (10 points)

Total: **Points** _____

Bonus section Points to subtract from total _____

18. You have been instrumental in helping an institution, such as a church, school or workplace; live more responsibly (setting up a recycling program, purchasing paper with high recycled content, ending use of lawn chemicals, having an energy audit, etc.).

Yes: -50 points.

19. You have been instrumental in helping a community or larger network live more responsibly (instigating a community-wide recycling program, bringing a multi-site company online for recycling or for purchasing compact fluorescent light bulbs, etc.).

Yes: -100 points

20. You actively take responsibility for other people's wastefulness (pulling recyclables out of the neighbor's trash, picking up aluminum cans along the roadway, etc.)

Yes: -25 points

21. Do others sometimes notice and/or comment on your environmentally conscious lifestyle?

Yes: -25 points

Grand total: **Points** _____

(From New Community Project and written by David Radcliff – permission granted for congregational use.)

Footprints II

As I looked back on my life, I could see the footprints I had left as I walked through this world – like footprints in the sand. At first, the prints were deep and distinctive – as if I had been stomping along or carrying something quite heavy. Then, later on, I noticed they gradually became lighter – and were soon joined by other footprints, both human and animal, walking alongside. “Lord,” I asked, “why were my feet making such deep imprints for a while, but then became lighter and seemed to be joined by others?”

“My child,” the Lord replied, “in the beginning you had the idea that life consists in the abundance of possessions, and you gathered as much of my Earth as you could carry. But then,” the Lord said with a smile, “you realized that life is much more than these things – not only lightening your footprint, but lightening your impact on the good earth.”

“And the steps beside mine?”

“At first there was no room in your world for these others, but after the change... they turned out to be the treasure you had been seeking all along.”

– New Community Project

Peace through justice/Care for Creation/Experiential learning

www.newcommunityproject.org; 888-800-2985

718 Wilder Street, Elgin, IL 60123 (used with permission)

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- How does the ecological footprint calculation exercise affect you as you consider the impact we in the West have on the rest of the world?
- To what extent should we be concerned about reducing our consumption and ecological footprint?
- To what extent is this an issue of caring for our neighbor?
- To what extent do we prioritize this issue alongside the other concerns facing our 6 billion global neighbors?
- What practical things have you and your family discussed that can help reduce your footprint?
- If you are familiar with the original version of “Footprints,” what parallels do you make between the original and the adapted version?

Stewardship and ownership

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers. Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?

Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation.

– Psalm 24:1-5 (NRSV)

A story is told of a group of scientists who discovered how to create life out of dirt. They were quite proud of themselves and invited the media to come and witness this amazing feat. God also decided to come and listen in. After a lengthy introduction, the scientists declared that the creation theory and the need for a God as Creator could now be set aside since they had shown what could be done through the scientific process.

As they were about to begin their exercise with a box of dirt they had brought for the purpose of the demonstration, God's voice boomed over the crowd. “Excuse me – would you mind using your own dirt?”

God's fingerprints are over all of creation. Nothing that exists was made without God – be it the earth, the sky or the sea. As we reflect on our achievements, we need to be careful to avoid an arrogant spirit concerning what we have accomplished without recognizing first what God has done to make our actions and successes possible.

Stewardship and partnership

A pastor went to visit the home of a member who was known for his love of gardening. After touring the backyard, the pastor made the comment of how beautifully manicured the lawns and gardens were and what a glorious work God continues to do with creation. The master gardener considered this for a moment, then quietly responded saying, "Well, you should have seen it when God was working at it by himself."

Read Genesis 2:15-17 and note how God invites Adam and Eve to partner with him in tending the Garden of Eden. The traditional interpretation uses the words "till and keep." More accurate interpretations for our day might be to "preserve and protect."

In Genesis 1:28 the words "subdue" or "dominion" are often used. But to have dominion is not to dominate, but rather to be a steward. The word *dominion* has association with the concept of kingly rule. A king who serves well is one who cares for the subjects within his realm. Domination is a misuse of power, be it over people or over the resources God has placed here to tend and protect.

The original role for Adam and Eve (in addition to being God's companions) – and the ongoing duty for us all – was to care for, protect and enjoy what God had created.

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- Where do you most see God's "fingerprints" (evidence of God's presence) when you look at creation?
- In what ways do you see us needing to partner with God just as Adam and Eve were created to partner with God in Eden (Genesis 2:15-17)?

The practice of usufruct

There is a wonderful and obscure word that has resurfaced recently as a result of renewed conviction about caring for creation. It is the word "usufruct." Its origins date back to the time of the Roman Empire. It was a concept that recognized that land in particular was to be held in trust for future generations. The idea of land ownership was held very loosely. Since land was here before humanity, and since it will be here long after we leave, it is a resource to be treated with care and respect.

Thomas Jefferson reintroduced this word into our nation's consciousness as the laws of land were being formulated at the beginning stages of our nation. Jefferson was a farmer who at his core understood the importance of being stewards of the land. He emphasized in his writings that we were "trustees," not owners of the land. This emphasis by Jefferson became known as the Stewardship Doctrine, which traced its roots back to the teachings of Leviticus 25:23: "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants."

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Jefferson's philosophy that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living at least partially reiterates the biblical paradigm of the earth as intergenerational commons, the fruits and benefits of which should be accessible to every member of every generation. He takes the position that no landholder has a natural right to control the land or dispose of it after his or her death. The land is entailed to the larger society; it reverts to the larger society upon the holder's death. Society may choose to pass the land on to beneficiaries or assignees chosen by the original landholder, but there is nothing in natural law which requires this. By universal law, indeed, whatever, whether fixed or moveable, belongs to all men equally and in common, is the property for the moment of him who occupies it; but when he relinquishes the occupation, the property goes with it.

(Intergenerational Justice in the United States Constitution, The Stewardship Doctrine: ©Constitutional Law Foundation, 50 W. 36th St., Eugene, Ore.)

Conclusion

The land, water and sky were always important to people who lived off it and depended on it for food, shelter and survival. With more of us losing this sense of connection, we need to keep in mind that this world, though not permanent, is our current home and, should the Lord tarry, will become the home of others who will follow us.

As you leave your place of meeting today and step outdoors, take a moment to look up and down and around at the wonder of what no human had a hand in making. All of creation is a gift from God offered as a gesture of love to all of humanity.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning – the sixth day. (Genesis 1:31)

Additional reading and small group discussion resources

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Student handout

Stewards of creation

God of heaven and earth

Genesis 2:15; Leviticus 25:23; Psalm 24:1

Getting started

What level of importance should we give to the subject of caring for the Earth? Chances are, responses will vary widely, but ask this question in church and you may hear comments such as:

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- How can you claim to be a steward of creation if you hunt for sport?

Discuss your thoughts about these responses as well as other common objections you've heard or may feel yourself.

Creation care and the Mennonite confession of faith

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- In what ways do you see us needing to partner with God just as Adam and Eve were created to partner with God in Eden (see Genesis 2:15-17)?

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