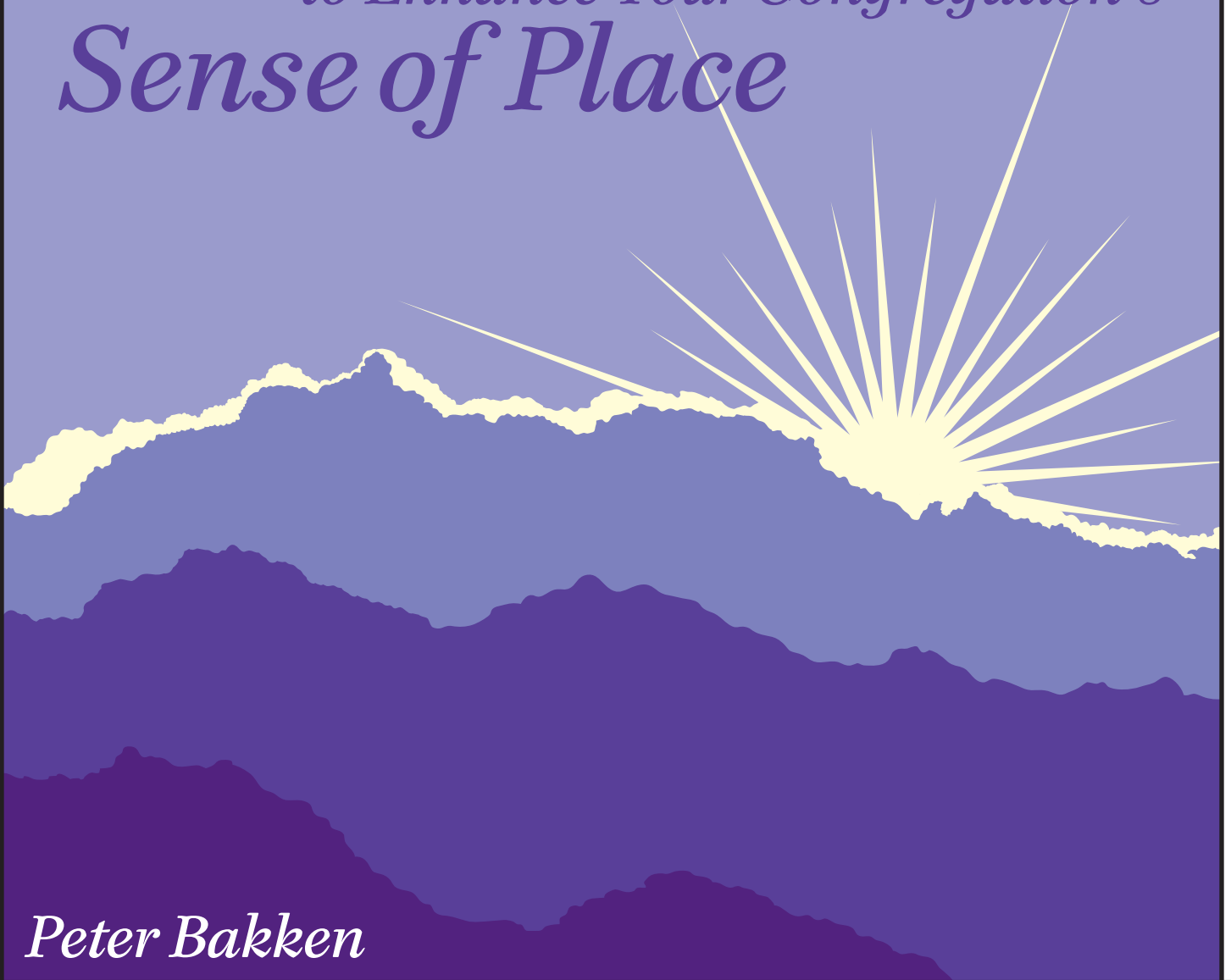


CARING FOR OUR
CORNER *of*
CREATION

*A Study-Action Program
to Enhance Your Congregation's
Sense of Place*



Peter Bakken



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Introduction

What is a “Sense of Place?”

“Caring for Our Corner of Creation” is a study-action program designed to help your congregation carry out its mission and ministry with a deepened, enriched, and engaged sense of place.

We all know what *place* means, but the term here is used to focus our attention on:

- The concrete, particular, physical aspects of our **everyday surroundings** whether natural or artificial, ordinary or special;
- Our network of day-to-day **relationships** with other people, the natural environment and other living things in our local environment; and
- The way in which our surroundings and those relationships **interact** with each other.

By a *sense of place* we mean:

- **Awareness** and **appreciation** of the natural and cultural features of one’s location; and
- a feeling of personal **affection** for, **attachment** to, or **identification** with that locale;
- that lead to a disposition to take **responsibility** for the common good of the local community and the well-being of one’s human and nonhuman neighbors.

On the basis of these understandings, the core concept of this study-action guide is:

*The place in which your congregation is located
is God’s good gift
of a life-sustaining environment
that is shared in community with other people
and other creatures.
It is a piece of creation
which is your congregation’s “duty and delight”
to celebrate
and care for
to the glory and praise of God,
for the health and well-being of people,
and for the flourishing of all God’s creatures.*

Why Place?

The theme of “Place” has been getting a significant amount of attention recently, as a variety of contemporary developments have raised concerns about our relationships to and experiences of place:

- Our **automobile-centered society** has resulted in air pollution and loss of fertile soil as more and more land is covered with asphalt and concrete. Runoff from paved surfaces also increases water pollution and soil erosion and reduces the replenishment of groundwater and the flow of water to wildlife habitat. **Urban sprawl** is often ugly and diminishes social life as businesses leave city centers and neighborhoods and neighbors interact less. Having a car is expensive, but **lacking public transportation**, low-income people may not have easy access to jobs, food, health care, affordable housing, and other necessities.
- **Human health** suffers from air pollution from automobiles and the increased incidence of asthma. As people spend more time in their cars, they get less physical exercise and eat more fast food and less fresh, locally grown food. Children spend more time inside and play less outdoors. Obesity and diabetes are among the health impacts of this lifestyle.
- With the availability of automobiles and other forms of long-distance transportation, there is greater **mobility** and transience in our lives as people move away from their birthplaces and relocate several times in the course of their careers, leading to a sense of **rootlessness** for many.
- The **speed and busyness** of modern life distracts us from the people and things around us and can make our relationships to them shallower or more superficial. We lack time for adequate rest, exercise and healthy eating.
- **Isolation from the natural world** results from increasing urbanization and the dominance of virtual reality in our lives through electronic media and the Internet. As more space is built up, there is less opportunity for children – and adults – to explore the world out of doors. As technological conveniences pervade our lives, we become **less conscious of our interdependence** with other people and the natural environment.
- We are also tempted to **withdraw from the public sphere** into private consumption, “home entertainment systems” and interact only with those of similar backgrounds and viewpoints. As a result, our political life becomes fragmented into competing interest groups, with a **diminished sense of community and the common good**.
- The global economy has **disrupted local economies, eroded local cultures, reduced local diversity, and diminished local control**, as communities become more dependent on remote political powers and commercial interests and more open to outside influences. As people and goods are moved long distances through the global economy, fossil fuels are consumed and pollution produced.

Many of these criticisms of the “placelessness” of modern society are controversial and hotly debated, especially since many of these developments have beneficial aspects as well as destructive ones. But they have been felt widely and strongly enough to give rise to several recent **social movements** that you may have heard about:

- Promotion of **local food** systems (e.g., “New Agrarianism”) through farmers’ markets; community-supported agriculture (where households buy shares in a local farm, receiving a box of produce every week or two); grocery stores and restaurants highlighting food from local sources; household and community gardens; supporting family farms.
- **Strengthening local economies** (e.g., “Buy Local”) to increase self-reliance and to support small, “main street” businesses and rural communities.

- **Urban and regional planning** (e.g., “Smart Growth” and “New Urbanism”) that aims to preserve green space, foster neighborhood vitality, reduces sprawl and reliance on automobiles, etc.
- **Environmental justice** efforts to defend and support particular communities impacted by resource exploitation and industrial pollution, or that could benefit from “green jobs” created by locally-based renewable energy, recycling, etc.
- **Place-Based Education** in schools and nature centers that seeks to inform and motivate environmentally responsible behavior and civic engagement in students’ local communities.
- **Bioregionalism**, which teaches people to look at their place in terms of environmental features like watersheds and ecosystems rather than just in terms of arbitrary political boundaries.
- **Community-Based Conservation** that involves local residents in the protection of wildlife habitat and natural resources.

But What Makes Sense of Place a Faith Issue?

Concern for a sense of place is not simply a “secular” issue, however. It is also grounded in our faith in God as the Creator and Redeemer of all things, and in Christ as Sovereign over our whole lives. Some of the key biblical themes that support the congregation’s calling to awareness, appreciation, and care for its place are:

- All that sustains and enriches our lives are **gifts from God** (Ps. 147). We often overlook and neglect those ordinary, everyday gifts that come to us in and through the places in which we and our neighbors and fellow creatures live. These gifts are the shared gifts of the “commons” and constitute the “commonwealth;” they come to us not simply as individuals, but as persons-in-community. Appreciation for these gifts of culture and nature moves us not only to gratitude to God, but also to understand them, care for them, protect them, cultivate them, and share them with others.
- **Love God, love your neighbor** (Matt. 22:34-40). Loving God the Creator means appreciating and caring for what God has made here and now. Attending to the neighbor’s need also involves attending to his or her need for sustenance, community, creativity, contemplation, and joy – “Beauty as well as bread” (John Muir). Love of neighbor therefore also requires intelligent and caring attention to the local resources for meeting those needs and the total quality of their social and physical environment.
- **Adam was placed in the garden** to till (literally, to “serve”) and keep it (Gen. 2:4b-15). We, too, have the vocation of tending the corner of creation where God has placed us, the common ground we share with our human and nonhuman fellow creatures. We therefore are called to be responsible stewards of created goods, for the glory of God and the well-being of our neighbors and of creation. Our stewardship includes not only our personal possessions, but the “commonwealth” of the communities in which we live – the public goods and the public structures of the places that we share with our neighbors.
- A sense of place – especially in terms of relationship to “the land” continues to be a central theme in the **Biblical story**, from God’s calling Abraham from the land of Ur; to the Israelites’ sojourn in Egypt as refugees and then as slaves; to their wandering in the wilderness after the Exodus and their entry into the promised land; to the laws regulating the distribution and care of the land; to the loss of the land and the Exile under alien empires; to Jesus’ ministry in Palestine and the spread of the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire. As biblical scholars

such as Walter Brueggemann have argued, the story told in scripture is the story of God, God's people, and God's land (see Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, rev. ed, Fortress Press, 2002).

- **Creation and redemption, spirituality and daily life, belong together.** “Redemption” is the restoration and renewal of creation, not a means of escape from it (Isa. 65:17-25; Rom. 8:18-23; Rev. 21:1-2). Christ is the Lord of nature and the cosmos, not only of our own inner lives and interpersonal relationships. (Col. 1:15-20). “Spirituality” is a dimension of our whole lives, not a separate, private compartment. The quality of our places and our attentiveness to place is also important for our spiritual well-being. Our places are where we most directly encounter God's creation – both human and nonhuman. Our places are where we live out our lives and vocations, which should be reflections of God's love and responses to God's grace, they are the weekday places where we enact what we have received on Sunday. Cultivating a sense of place helps to integrate spirituality with ordinary, daily life – slow travel (walking, bicycling, canoeing) and other ways of slowing down and paying attention to our surroundings awaken us to the grace of God in the here and now. Protecting natural habitat helps us to experience awe and wonder at God's works, and to enjoy God's sustaining gifts.

The Course

The overall trajectory of the course is to begin by exploring class members' sense of place, and through a series of brief Bible studies, explorations of the church building and grounds, and thinking about the congregation's wider context, to help them become aware of how God calls your congregation to care for its place.

In **Session 1, Exploring the Gift of Place**, participants are invited to become more conscious of their own sense of place by recalling how places have been important in their lives. A study of Psalm 104 shows that places are God's gifts to humans and other creatures.

Session 2, The Church as Habitat: Building and Grounds presents Genesis 2 as a message about our responsibility to care for God's gift of place. A mini-field trip around the church property is an opportunity for participants to see how their congregation expresses its awareness, appreciation and care for its place in creation.

Session 3, Creation in the Church: Worship uses a discussion of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5 and another mini-field trip to the church's worship space to suggest that the congregation can use aspects of its place in proclaiming the message of God's grace and human responsibility.

In **Session 4, Seeking the Well-Being of Our Places**, the class will think about how their congregation can respond to God's call in Jeremiah 29 to “seek the welfare of the city” – the wider community and landscape that is the place where they live.

Session 5, The Church Caring for its Corner of Creation: Action Planning, outlines a process by which the class can come up with an action plan for a congregational project to make its corner of creation a better place in which to live, for people and for other creatures.

The Project

By the end of the course, participants will have identified one or more congregational projects to undertake. Exploring the gifts of your place will have prepared the ground for your congregation so you can cultivate those gifts in ways that will help people – and other creatures – to experience the

gifts of God’s creative and redemptive activity in and around your community.

Since place is a multidimensional reality, and the project will respond to the very particular and distinctive qualities of the congregation’s location and assets, the possibilities are vast. Appendix 1 lists some examples that are intended to be suggestive but by no means exhaustive.

But whatever form they take, projects should reflect the belief that our places in creation are where God, humanity and nature encounter one another creatively and redemptively. Without treating nature as a mere resource to be managed to meet human needs, we can work to ensure that the life-sustaining and spirit-enriching gifts of nature – healthy food, clear water, clean air, shelter, constructive labor, contact with the soil and other living things, beauty and wonder – are available to all people, especially the poorest and most vulnerable members of our communities.

Also, because place is many-faceted, it is helpful not to think of the project as belonging to any one standing committee or area of church operations and ministry. Ideally, the project should integrate to some extent one or more of the usual departments of congregational life: worship, education, fellowship, building, grounds, operations, community service, and advocacy. If your church has a formal mission statement, make it clear to the congregation how the program is an expression of that mission. Celebrating and caring for place is part of acting out the Gospel of Jesus Christ as *good news* – for the whole creation. (Col. 1:20)

“In-Reach” – Impacting the Whole Congregation

“Caring for Our Corner of Creation” is not intended to be a sideline activity of a few members of the congregation, though of course not everyone will be directly or deeply involved in it. But the whole congregation can be *aware* of it. As a pervasive reality, place is important to everyone: it is simply a matter of helping people to make what may be implicit and unrecognized a matter of conscious awareness. Discerning God’s will for us as persons embedded in our particular communities and landscapes is an essential element of Christian discipleship.

Making the congregation at large aware of what is being learned, discussed, experienced and accomplished in this program could be described as “in-reach” – reaching members within the congregation in contrast to persons outside it.

Before the start of the course: In-reach can begin as part of recruitment but also as a way of educating those who will not be participating in the course. Newsletter articles, quotes in Sunday bulletins, bulletin board displays, features on the church’s website, e-mail notices, sermons are a few of the channels through which the theme of the gift of place can be introduced to a wider audience.

During the course: Participants can be encouraged to write articles, create displays, make videos, give presentations, lead field trips or sense of place exercises in their roles as Sunday School teachers, committee members, youth group leaders, and so on. Bible studies, book discussions, or movie nights could also take relationship to place or to the land as a theme.

If any resource persons with special expertise have been identified during the course – e.g., architects, landscapers, local historians, naturalists, community organizers, farmers, gardeners – they could also be asked to make presentations to other groups in the congregation.

Gratitude for the gifts of place could be woven into other church events: As a stewardship theme or the theme of an Earth Sunday, Thanksgiving, St. Francis’ Day, or other worship service. A church supper could highlight local foods.... and so on.

When the project is planned and implemented: Wherever possible, an educational, and even

worshipful, activity (e.g., a bible study, prayer, or blessing) should be built into or connected to the project that makes explicit its basis in our faith in the giftedness of creation and our responsibility to care for it and our neighbors. Such activities could also increase awareness of the congregation's historical and environmental context and encourage reflection on the meaning of shared places in our life together as a congregation and a community.

Anticipating Obstacles

As you prepare for this program, be aware of potential obstacles and objections that may be raised in the class and the congregation. It is advisable to consider these in advance, based on your familiarity with the congregation and its members. Possible objections are far too numerous to list here, but they include:

- Concern for the environment is *heretical*, rooted in paganism (earth-worship, nature worship, pantheism, “New Age” philosophies, etc.) or atheism (as associated with evolutionary science). Among more specific complaints:
 - Environmentalism is a religion, setting nature in place of God;
 - Environmentalism makes humans subordinate or merely equal to animals, plants, etc., denying that we are the image of God and have been given dominion over creation;
 - Environmentalism substitutes “books in brooks and sermons in running streams” for Word and Sacrament as means of grace and knowledge of God;
- Environmentalism (urban planning, land use policy, etc.) is a *liberal or socialist* political ideology that favors government control over free market capitalism and individual freedom and responsibility.
- Solving social and environmental problems, even if these are valid concerns in themselves, is *not the proper business* of the church. Variations on this theme include:
 - The church is in the business of preaching the Gospel and saving souls, not reforming society or saving the environment.
 - The separation of church and state means that religious organizations can't talk about public policy.
 - The church should limit itself to addressing human needs because these take priority over environmental concerns.

Some of these charges are implicitly addressed above in “But Why is Place a Faith Issue?” (pp. 5-6) Whole books could be – and have been – written in response to these and other objections. (See especially those written by Evangelical writers such as Calvin DeWitt, Steven Bouma-Prediger, and Edward Brown, listed in Appendix 3: Resources.) While it may be helpful to think through how you can respond to the most likely objections you may encounter, don't get overly worried about it. Even the most cogent answer will not satisfy some people. The best general response may be to ask everyone – on whatever side of an issue – to listen to what Scripture has to say, to avoid labeling people or positions, and not to practice guilt by association.

Another potential source of conflict is the dark side of attachment to place. Precisely because places can have different meanings for different people, and because those meanings can be so intensely felt, decisions about what to do – or not do – with a place can lead to friction within a community. For instance, installing solar panels or turning part of the lawn into a garden might upset people who like the church and its grounds to look the way they remember it from childhood. Or, changes

in how food waste is handled after church suppers, or replacing pesticides and chemical fertilizer with organic lawn care practices, may bother people who prefer “the way we’ve *always* done it,” especially if they feel a strong sense of personal ownership of these areas of the church’s life. It is therefore important to engage all the relevant stakeholders in making decisions about the church’s property.

Also, in addressing the church’s relationship to the larger community, it is also important to lift up the value of neighborliness and hospitality to the stranger to counteract tendencies to fear and exclude those who we may think of as “not our kind.” For example, the arrival of new groups of immigrants may arouse fear and prejudice in the community, and church members may object to efforts to develop forms of service and outreach to them that introduce a new language or unfamiliar artistic styles or cuisines into the congregation. Or, opening the building to a homeless shelter or food pantry may raise concerns about security, property damage, or of making the church look “lower class.” Again, awareness of and sensitivity to these feelings is necessary in order to work through potential conflicts.

Also, think about the sorts of barriers that can arise in a congregation about any proposal – lack of resources, avoidance of conflict, fear of failure, resistance to change, etc. – especially as you begin to plan your project or projects. But be sure to strategize how to overcome them, and don’t let your own apprehensions dampen your enthusiasm or the energy of others. The point is not to be blindsided.

Course Facilitator's Guide

Recruitment

Proactive recruitment of the participants of the course is extremely important. In addition to publicizing the course to the congregation well in advance, and through as many channels as possible, extend personal invitations. Emphasize that this is not simply another study course, but a shared learning process leading to concrete actions to advance the church's mission in new and exciting ways.

These personal invitations should help to ensure that the class has a diversity of ages, genders, ethnicities, community involvements, and occupations. It will also be enriching to the class to include both new and long-time members; persons from varied economic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds; and personal histories of having lived in different places. An individual's sense of place is informed by these and other factors, so including multiple perspectives will greatly enrich the class members' experience.

Take advantage of the fact that there are many reasons to be interested in learning more about one's place, experiencing it more deeply, and taking action to protect and improve it. (See the discussion of "Why Place?," pp. 3-4.) This course is for anyone who wants to connect their faith and daily life in a more intentional way.

Because the course is oriented toward action, it is important that the class, or at least a significant core group, be committed to class attendance, participation in final project, some "homework" between class sessions, and communicating their learning experiences and projects with the rest of the congregation.

Format

The course curriculum consists of four 50-minute modules and a 50-90 minute Action Planning session:

- I Exploring the Gift of Place
- II The Church as Habitat: Building and Grounds
- III Creation in the Church: Worship
- IV Seeking the Well-Being of Our Places
- V The Church Caring for its Corner of Creation: Action Planning

These modules can be subdivided or combined in different formats. For example:

- A five-session Adult Forum on Sunday mornings or weekday evenings;
- Three Saturday retreats, held over a three- to ten-week period
- One overnight retreat

The order of the middle three sessions can be rearranged if there are particular advantages to doing so. (Sessions I-IV roughly correspond to the chapters of *Church on Earth: Grounding Your Ministry in a Sense of Place*, by Jeff Wild and Peter Bakken, Augsburg Fortress, 2009.)

Session plans are written to fit a 50-60 minute **Sunday morning Adult Forum**. If you use this

option, you might want to hold Session V: Action Planning at a different time so that you can meet for 90 minutes.

Evening or weekend sessions (including sessions after the last worship service), however, could run a full 90 minutes or longer and combine two sessions. Lunch (potluck or bring your own) or refreshments could be included, which could allow you or class members to showcase local foods. Longer sessions can provide more time for class members to share from their journals, or to work together on projects to share what the participants have learned with the rest of the congregation, e.g., a bulletin board display or worship service. These sessions could be held weekly, every other week, or monthly.

One-day **retreats** should be held at the church, and at least one of these should be scheduled during a season that people can be outdoors.

Spacing out the sessions with a week or more in between them has the advantage of allowing more time for participants to reflect and do research on their own, and to allow their questions to percolate and their insights to emerge and mature.

Keep in mind that Session III involves spending time outside, on the church grounds; depending on your schedule, you may need to rearrange the order of the sessions to make sure that this one occurs at a suitable time of year.

Resources

Identifying and using sources of local knowledge – including individuals, organizations, websites, and print materials – can make the course concrete, informative, and unique to your place.

There may be members of your congregation and people in your community who have expertise in local history and ecology, urban planning and city administration, gardening and agriculture, architecture and landscaping design, public health, environmental policy, conservation and restoration ecology, wastewater management, energy production, art, economics, sociology, and so on. These persons may be with state agencies, local non-profits, historical societies, schools and universities, local businesses or other organizations. Invite them to sessions that will touch on their particular area of knowledge to help lead the class or to be available to answer questions or provide special insights.

Visit nearby libraries and bookstores and consult the sections that deal with local and regional history, geography, and ecology. Appendix 2 of this guide lists print resources, Internet sites, and organizations that deal with the issue of sense of place and also those that can give you detailed information about your area.

The quotes sprinkled throughout the text are intended to spark further reflection about sense of place. If you find any of them insightful or thought provoking, you could share them with the class, include them in course advertisements, post them as part of displays in the church, or submit them for the Sunday bulletin or monthly church newsletter.

Tips for Leading Discussions

The theme of place is intended to point to what is literally “common ground” for diverse groups of people. But a shared space is where people can come together in conflict as well as in cooperation and fellowship. This study emphasizes the common ground aspect of place and does not directly address political issues. However, it is possible that controversial issues of environmental policy,

lifestyle, land use, social services, and so on may come up in your discussions. (Review the sections on “But Why is Place a Faith Issue?” pp. 5-6 and “Anticipating Obstacles,” pp. 8-9 as part of your preparation.)

It may be helpful to post, distribute, or briefly review some “ground rules” for discussions at the beginning of each session:

1. Each person gets a chance to talk.
2. One person talks at a time. Don’t interrupt.
3. Help the discussion leader keep things on track.
4. Listen carefully and with respect.
5. It’s OK to disagree, but be sure to show respect for one another.
6. If someone says something that hurts or bothers you, say so, and say why.
7. Speak for yourself, and not as the representative of any group. Don’t put words in other people’s mouths. Remember that others are speaking for themselves, too.
8. Some of the things we say in this course will be personal. Any personal story told by someone in the group is not to be repeated outside the group unless that person gives permission.

The discussion questions and exercises are meant to enable the class members to generate their own insights into biblical texts and the many meanings and values of place on the basis of their own interests, values, and experiences. However, in order to clarify the point of these activities, and to help keep discussion moving and on an appropriate track, additional background material and possible responses to questions are provided in italics. These should not be presented as the only “right” answers, or be used to limit ideas or close off discussion.

The exercises are also intended to bring out similarities and contrasts in class members’ sense of place. Even though we may live in the same community or neighborhood, everyone’s sense of place is unique. Every participant brings to the course a different viewpoint, life story, and set of relationships, and every participant will take away from the course different insights, ideas, information, memories and experiences. At the same time the values and concerns that they share – as members of their local Christian congregation and inhabitants of their landscape and community – make it possible for them to identify and work together toward common goals.

A “Parking Lot” for Action Ideas

Some class members may be very action-oriented, and be impatient with talking and thinking and studying rather than *doing*. Their energy needs to be captured and sustained, but not allowed to divert the process and become another form of busyness that keeps us from the slow, quiet, patient attending to the movements of God’s grace in our everyday surroundings.

During the first four sessions, you can keep track of action ideas that are proposed by using a page of a notebook, white board or sheet of paper posted on one side of the room (don’t let it become the center of attention), etc. as a “parking lot.” If they are big ideas, review them in the brainstorming session. If they are more limited actions, have one or more members of the class follow up by initiating the action themselves or bringing it to the appropriate church committee. Ask them to report back on their progress at a later session. You can also record ideas for topics to explore further in later adult classes (e.g., Bible and ecology, Israel and the land, contemporary social or environmental issues, etc.).

Between Classes

At the first session, you will give participants a “Place Matters” workbook – a looseleaf binder or pocket folder with fasteners – containing two handouts with suggestions for reflection (“Why Place Matters to Me” and “Why Place is a Faith Issue for Me”, pp. 61-68) and paper to record their thoughts and observations. Encourage participants to use this workbook as a kind of class journal during the week, as a way of thinking about the course topic between sessions and making connections between the class discussions and their everyday experiences. Also remind them to bring the workbook with them to each class, so that they can refer to the notes they’ve made during discussions or as part of a sharing time at the beginning of the session. (The workbook can also be used to hold handouts and notes from class sessions).

Another idea would be to set up an email list, listserv, Facebook page, or other online tool for people to share ideas and comments about the course topic with each other between classes. Frequent infusions of fresh content will be needed to keep people engaged. You may have to make regular postings of your own.

Sharing with the Congregation

As mentioned in “In-Reach – Impacting the Whole Congregation” on pp. 7-8, themes and ideas from the course can be shared with the whole congregation in a variety of ways:

- A “sense of place” bulletin board, display, and/or web page with quotes, photos, drawings, reflections, maps, clippings, etc.
- Prayers, banners, vestments, altar flower/plant arrangements, recommended hymns, special bulletin cover art, etc. for worship;
- Planning an outdoor worship service or procession around the church;
- Newsletter article, e-mail, web page, or bulletin insert with suggestions for reflection or a sense-of-place exercise;
- Planning a fellowship activity for congregation, such as a field trip, providing local foods for a church function, a guest speaker on the human or natural history of the area, an event with music and poetry that expresses the local culture and natural environment;
- Smaller-scale action ideas that arise during the course of the class, as described above.

Exploring the Gift of Place

Goals

- Understand the idea of a “sense of place.”
- Become more conscious of your own sense of place.
- Deepen your sense of gratitude for creation as God’s gift of place for humans and other creatures.

Materials Needed

For each participant:

- Handout 1: “Place Matters” Workbook (a loose-leaf binder or pocket folder with fasteners for 3-hole punch notebook paper and handouts), including:
 - 1a: Why Place Matters to Me (pp. 61-66)
 - 1b: Why Place is a Faith Issue for Me (pp. 67-68)

For the class:

- A large sheet(s) of paper on which has been written the following (abridged if necessary) from page 3:
 - The meaning of “place”
 - The meaning of “sense of place”
 - The core concept of “sense of place”
- Bibles (or have participants bring their own)
- A flip chart or white board for “parking” action ideas (see p. 12) or other notes.

Introduction (10 min.)

Opening prayer:

Select an appropriate prayer from Appendix 1 to open the session.

Participant introductions:

Pass around a sheet of paper to gather names and contact information (optional – if you need them for your own recording, evaluation, or communications needs).

Have each member introduce themselves and:

1. Tell *briefly* about a place in their past that has been important to them; and
2. *Briefly* say why they are interested in this program and mention any particular interest or concern they have about the topic.

“No matter where you go, there you are.”

Yogi Berra

“One’s own landscape comes in time to be a sort of outlying part of himself; he has sowed himself broadcast upon it, and it reflects his own moods and feelings; he is sensitive to the verge of the horizon: cut those trees, and he bleeds; mar those hills, and he suffers. How has the farmer planted himself in his fields; builded himself into his stone walls, and evoked the sympathy of the hills by his struggle!”

John Burroughs

Introduce the program, series, and session

Explain in your own words that the purpose of the program is to help your congregation carry out its mission and ministry with a deepened, enriched, and engaged sense of place.

Explain in your own words that the goal of this series is:

1. To deepen your awareness, appreciation, and sense of responsibility for your own place – that is, where you live, work, play, and relax from week to week – as God’s gift.
2. To develop an action plan for ways our congregation can celebrate and care for its place – both the church’s property and the community and landscape of which it is a part.

Post and read the sheets of paper with the meaning of place and sense of place and the statement of the core concept of the course. Ask if anyone has questions about clarifying the meaning of these statements or any of the terms used.

If it seems helpful, you can spell out the idea further along the following lines:

We are used to thinking about how our relationship to God in Jesus Christ should influence our relationships to other people – how we should be loving, forgiving, and responsible toward family members, friends, neighbors and co-workers. But God has placed us in other relationships, too: to the people in our neighborhood, town, city, and county; to our physical environment of buildings, streets, water systems, electrical grid, lakes, rivers, hills, and farm fields; and to the trees, flowers, birds, insects, animals and other living creatures that share our patch of Earth. These things are all part of what God has made. God calls us to care for them, too. Together they make up our “place” in the world.

In order to care for people and other creatures, we have to understand and appreciate them. Understanding and appreciating the community and landscape in which we live day-to-day is what we mean by a “sense of place.” A sense of place includes being aware of the distinctive character of a place, and how the place and its particular qualities affects our lives and the lives of our human and nonhuman neighbors. The more we know and value about our place, the better we can care for it in ways that support and enrich the lives of all who live there.

Our congregation as a gathered community, with its building and grounds, also does its ministry and mission in this particular place. When its members and leaders know and cherish that place, the church can carry out its work more faithfully and effectively. In this class, we will explore how a sense of place can become a lively part of all aspects of our congregation’s life.

Briefly review the topics and your schedule for the sessions: introduction; building and grounds; worship and education; community and environment; and an action planning session.

Discussion (15 min.)

The purpose of the following exercise is to help each participant become more aware of her or his own sense of place. The first question helps the participant think about what qualities she or he has valued about a particular place. The second question prompts the participant to reflect on the role that place has had in the story of her or his life. The third question points out the fact that places have their own stories, too. (It has been said that a story is what makes a “space” a “place.”)

Divide the class into pairs or small groups. Ask them to discuss the following questions with respect to the places they mentioned in their introductions.

1. What elements made it special: Natural features? Plants or animals? Human-made or cultivated features? Social gatherings and activities?
2. Is there any lasting value that it has given you: A lesson or insight? A sustaining or enriching memory? A contribution to your character or sense of vocation? An opportunity for renewal or redirection in life?
3. What has happened to the place since you first encountered it? What is it like now?

(You can write memory cues on the flip chart or whiteboard if necessary: “What made it special?” “What did it give you?” “What is it like now?”)

These personal reflections lay the foundation for later sessions, when we will be thinking about how we as individuals and as a congregation can care for our place. Being aware of the qualities that we and other people have appreciated about places in the past helps us think about what qualities we want to preserve or enhance in the place where we live now. Knowing how places have been important for us helps us to see how they can be important for other people. Remembering how places change over time reminds us how our actions can make a place better or worse for other people and other creatures to live in. Loving our neighbor also means loving our – and their – neighborhood.

“God the creator has not only placed man in the fair garden of earth, but has invested both man and his other creation, earth, with the gift to respond to each other in love! Man not only loves the earth; he has added grace whereby he is attached to and lovingly related to his own corner of God’s creation with a peculiar pathos and affection.”

Joseph Sittler

Bible Studies (20 min.)

The purpose of the following Bible studies is to help participants connect their own sense of the value of place with the biblical theme of “promised land” and creation as the gift of a place to live – for ourselves, our neighbors, and our fellow creatures.

Bible Study: Promised Land (10 min.)

Places play an important role in the Bible, as gifts from God. For example, the theme of the “promised land” tells us that God’s will for God’s people is that they live in a “good place” – a place where their needs will be met, where they can live and flourish in community. As we’ve seen in our earlier discussion, we

also experience places as gifts from God. However, the goodness of a place may be a promise – something more potential than actual. Realizing that potential requires us to respond to God’s grace with loving, responsible care for land and people.

“Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience; to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder upon it, and dwell upon it.” N. Scott Momaday

Reconvene the whole class. Ask someone to read **Deuteronomy 8:7-17** out loud from their Bible:

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.

Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.’ (New Revised Standard Version)

Have the group discuss the following questions:

1. If you were to count your blessings, would you include the place where you live, or any of the places where you have lived? Why or why not?
2. Do you think of the place where you live as a “promised” or “promising land?” What does it promise that is still unfulfilled? What would it take to fulfill those promises?

Bible Study: The Web of Creation (10 min.)

Class discussion may already have demonstrated that the presence of plants, animals, birds and other living creatures is one of the things that we appreciate about places. Many people value the chance to see, hear, study, and care about the creatures that live around them.

The Bible not only recognizes that these creatures are part of the landscape in which humans live. It also speaks of God’s care for creatures other than human beings. This psalm shows that one of the ways God cares for non-human creatures is by giving them a place to live, where they can find food, water, and shelter. These creatures are not only part of our home place – we are part of theirs. How we treat our places affects their well-being – a theme we will return to later in this course.

Ask two people to read Psalm 104:10-26 by alternating verses (from the same translation):

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their thirst.
By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;
they sing among the branches.
From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to use,
to bring forth food from the earth,
and wine to gladden the human heart,
oil to make the face shine,
and bread to strengthen the human heart.
The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has its home in the fir trees.
The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the coney.
You have made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows its time for setting.
You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.
When the sun rises, they withdraw
and lie down in their dens.
People go out to their work
and to their labor until the evening.

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.

(New Revised Standard Version)

*“If you don’t know where you are,
you don’t know who you are.”*

Wendell Berry

Ask the class the following questions:

1. What places within the created order are mentioned in this psalm?
 - a. What creatures live in them?
 - b. What resources or benefits do these creatures receive in or from their places?
2. If you were to write a similar hymn of praise based on the area where you live, what habitats and creatures might you mention?
3. Do you think we can say that creatures other than humans also receive from God the gift of place? Why or why not?

“We are born into relationships with people and with places. We are born with the ability to create new relationships and tend to them. And we are born with a powerful longing for these relations. That complex connectedness nourishes and shapes us and gives us joy and purpose.” Kathleen Dean Moore

Conclusion (5 min.)

Thank the group, and remind them that the next session will focus on the church building and grounds.

Notebook Exercises (ongoing)

Direct participants to Handouts 1a: “Why Place Matters to Me” and 1b: “Why Place is a Faith Issue for Me.” Ask them to review these worksheets regularly – daily, if possible – between sessions, reflecting on the questions and making notes. (If time permits, you can take a few minutes at the beginning or end of each class session to ask people if they have any notes from these worksheets that they would like to share.)

Tell them that the next session will involve exploring the church’s building and grounds, and that they may want to bring magnifying glasses, cameras, or sketching materials.

Closing Prayer

Select an appropriate prayer from Appendix 2 to close the session.

After the Class

Review how the session went, and what should be done differently next time. If others are helping you with the class, make sure everyone knows who is responsible for what parts of preparing for and leading the next session.

Have someone from the class or planning group prepare a report to the congregation on a few key ideas or insights that have come out of this session, and share them through an announcement at worship, bulletin board display, or in next Sunday’s bulletin or the church newsletter or website.

The Church as Habitat: Building and Grounds

Goals

- Understand the biblical basis for our responsibility to care for creation and how it might apply in the modern world.
- Explore how the church building and grounds demonstrates the congregation's awareness, appreciation, and care of its place in creation.

Materials Needed

For each participant:

- Bibles (or they can bring their own)
- Magnifying glass, camera, or sketching materials (optional – they can bring their own)
- Handout 2: Questions for Inside and Outside the Building (p. 69)

Introduction (5 min.)

Opening prayer:

Select an appropriate prayer from Appendix 1 to open the session.

Reporting:

Invite class members to share from their notebooks thoughts they have had since the last session about the course topic.

Introduce session:

Remind the class that in the previous session, we learned to appreciate our local community and landscape as God's gift of a place for us, our neighbors, and for other living things to live in.

Explain that in this session we will learn about the responsibility that comes with this gift. We will think together about how we can carry out this responsibility in the place that our church building occupies.

“I take water for granted and assume there will be clean water for drinking and cooking, warm water for cleansing and fresh water for our garden. My travels have shaken me out of complacency, however. When I witness women walking for hours and then standing in line to fill a bucket with water, I realize both the precious gift and human necessity of water.”

Mark Hanson, ELCA Bishop

Bible Study: Tending the Garden (10 min.)

The purpose of this exercise is to show participants that the creation story in Genesis 2 teaches that God has given human beings the task of serving and protecting the garden of creation – that is, of maintaining and enhancing its ability to bring forth and support life.

Participants will also reflect on caring for creation as a task for each one of us as individuals, and for our congregation as a whole. The ideas of caring for creation and developing a sense of place are closely connected. Developing our sense of place helps us to care for that part of creation we can most directly and intimately enjoy, learn about, improve, and protect.

“To love a place is to care for it, to keep it healthy, to attend to its needs as if they were my own, because they are my own. Responsibility grows from love. It is the natural shape of caring.”

Kathleen Dean Moore

Ask one of the participants to read **Genesis 2:4-15** from his or her Bible:

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up — for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground — 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. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. (New Revised Standard Version)

Have the class discuss the following questions:

1. How is the garden described? What does it need?

The garden is both beautiful and useful (“good to eat”). It needs both water and human cultivation to flourish. Note that the human being seems to be created to meet the needs of the garden – not the other way around.

2. What does God do with “the man” (Hebrew, *adam*, human being, from *adamah*, ground or fertile soil)? What does this suggest about the human role or vocation (calling) in creation?

The human being is placed in the garden to “till” (literally, ‘serve’) and “keep” – guard, protect, preserve, maintain – it. This implies that the “calling” that God has given to human beings – part

of the purpose for which God created us – includes both creatively transforming the earth and preserving its beauty, diversity, and sustainability.

3. Adam’s task is one of cultivating the garden, which we usually think of in terms of farming or gardening. Can other human activities – such as those involved in “developing” land through construction and landscaping – be ways of carrying out this task?

Other human activities that can creatively transform the earth include art, engineering, architecture, technology, and landscaping. When done properly, these activities can be a form of “cultivation” that brings new forms of beauty and usefulness out of a part of creation. “Rightly” means patiently and attentively working with the earth and its living systems instead of destroying or recklessly exploiting them.

4. What values should guide the way we “develop” our places – especially, how we construct our church buildings and landscape their grounds? Give examples of how a church could follow these values.

Here are some examples of possible values or principles:

- a. Promote human health, community and spiritual development. Church development should pay attention to human health (e.g., by avoiding using toxic materials), community (e.g., by being accessible to all and by providing pleasant spaces for people to gather) and spirituality (e.g., through art and architecture that communicates joyful appreciation of God’s creation).*
- b. The beauty and fruitfulness of creation and the well-being of other creatures. Church buildings and grounds can enhance creation’s beauty and fruitfulness (e.g., energy conservation reduces pollution; church gardens beautify the neighborhood; landscaping with native plants provides habitat for wildlife).*
- c. The glory of God. We honor God’s good gifts of life and habitat for people and other creatures by protecting, sharing, and nurturing those gifts. When a congregation visibly honors those gifts in its building, landscaping, and operations as an expression of its faith, God is glorified.*

“Do we not already sing our love for and obligation to the land of the free and the home of the brave? Yes, but just what and whom do we love? Certainly not the soil, which we are sending helter-skelter downriver. Certainly not the waters, which we assume have no function except to turn turbines, float barges, or carry off sewage. Certainly not the plants, of which we exterminate whole communities without batting an eye. Certainly not the animals, of which we have already extirpated many of the largest and most beautiful species.” Aldo Leopold, conservationist

Exercise: Building as “Habitat” (30 min.)

We are usually only aware of church buildings (and other familiar places) as “background” to our activities. This exercise brings the “background” into the “foreground” by asking questions that cause participants to pay attention to the details of their surroundings.

The purpose of this activity is to increase class members’ awareness and appreciation of the character of the church property as a habitat – a healthy, pleasant, and useful living space. People may spend only a few hours a day or week at the church, but for some other creatures – for example, plants, insects, spiders, toads, chipmunks, voles – it may be their home all the time.

One way that a congregation can care for creation is to ensure that its building and grounds are a good habitat for people and other creatures. This new appreciation may reveal qualities that make parts of the congregation’s building and grounds a good place for people and other creatures to be, and that should be maintained. Or it may bring up problems that can be remedied or suggest ways that the building and grounds might be enhanced to make it more attractive, healthy, and useful.

“ Dwelling is not primarily inhabiting but taking care of and creating that space within which something comes into its own and flourishes.”

Martin Heidegger, philosopher

Activity (20 min.)

Distribute copies of **Handout 2: Questions for Inside and Outside the Building**. Ask each person to pick a spot inside or outside the building and go to it, with pen or pencil (and magnifying glass, camera, or sketching materials if they have brought them), and respond to the questions on the handout, and return in 20 minutes (or longer if you have time).

Discussion (10 min.)

Gather the group together and ask each person what new observation, insight, or question, if any, about their church as a habitat or environment for humans and other creatures they have gained through this exercise. (If you have more time, you can go through the individual questions from the handout.)

Some of the questions ask about the “function” of a part of the building and grounds. This helps participants to think about why that space is the way it is, what is there and how it is designed. Because the function of a place is often defined in terms of the activities that take place there, these questions focus attention on how places are connected with activities or behavior. Places are created to support or make possible certain activities or experiences, and so they may reflect the importance or value placed on them.

For example, a large and well-equipped kitchen may reflect the importance of shared meals in the congregation’s life, or it may reflect the church’s decision to offer community meals. A dingy, cramped, basement youth activities room may indicate that a church places little value on youth ministry. Well-kept gardens of native plants may reflect an appreciation for the beauty and diversity of creation, while the use of plastic plants inside a church may suggest a priority on convenience and an attitude toward plants as merely decorative in a vague sort of way.

Other questions ask about how people feel about particular parts of the building. A sense of place involves paying attention to what is inside oneself – thoughts, feelings, memories – as well as what is outside. Feelings can arise from many different characteristics of a place: whether the space is large or small, the color of the carpets or walls, personal memories or historical associations, religious symbols and artwork, and so on. Some of these reactions may be purely individual, others might be widely shared.

Finally, some questions ask about how indoor spaces are related to the outside world. This aspect of church architecture may be related to how a congregation understands itself in relation to the community and the rest of creation. We sometimes say that Christians are called to be “in the world but not of it.”

“The care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy, and after all our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it and to foster its renewal is our only hope.”

Wendell Berry, farmer and poet

Our church buildings may express this idea in different ways. Their “churchy” design and decorations – stained glass, steeples, pews, ornate carvings, biblical pictures and religious symbols – may distinguish them from secular buildings. Or, churches may deliberately try to look modern in their use of metal and glass, plain geometric shapes, contemporary art, and non-traditional architecture. A church building may be a little world-within-a-world closed off by stained glass windows and containing mostly religious images and church-related notices on its walls. Or, it may purposefully bring the world into the sanctuary with clear glass windows, and post information about public issues, notices about community events, and images of the natural world on its bulletin boards. The point is not to judge a style as “good” or “bad.”

Instead, it is to try to recognize some of the beliefs and values that are symbolized by the church building. Once we are aware of the beliefs and values that the church building already expresses, we may be able to think of ways the church building can more fully express the congregation’s caring, appreciative attitude toward the church’s surroundings.

Questions about the areas outside the building are also meant to raise awareness of how the church property is “used” by other creatures for food, shelter, and living space. A congregation expresses its attitude toward God’s creation by whether its grounds are hospitable or hostile to other creatures. A church in an urban setting can still include a small garden space or container gardens for native plantings, or houses for birds, bats or butterflies. A church in a more suburban or rural context can have landscaping that reflects the rich diversity and fruitfulness of creation rather than conform to the ideal of a tidy, uniform, manicured suburban lawn.

The outside areas can also reveal other ways that the church affects its environment. For example: how it handles its stormwater runoff from roof and parking lot; whether it has racks for people who bike to church or sidewalks for those who walk; how much trash it produces and whether it practices recycling or composting.

What could be done with your congregation’s building and grounds to evoke appreciation for God’s creation?

- *Post pictures of local or regional plants, animals, and landscapes. Put up posters describing ecological communities in the area, or depicting natural cycles such as the water cycle, carbon cycle, etc. Include biblical or other quotes to make clear they illustrate the wonders of God’s creation.*

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- *Plant vegetable and flower gardens, especially native plantings and landscaping, around the church. Have paths or benches to encourage prayer and meditation.*
 - *Add to the library books of nature writing, field guides, books on local and regional natural history, environmental issues, science and religion, and other topics related to the world as God's creation. Include some videos and magazines on the same themes.*
 - *Increase the amount and variety of native plantings around the church. Choose especially plants that provide food or cover for birds and animals.*
 - *Put up houses for bats (which help control insects like mosquitoes), butterflies, and birds around the church.*

[For additional ideas, see Appendix One]

Conclusion (5 min.)

Thank the group, and remind them that the next session will focus on a sense of place in the congregation's worship life.

Closing Prayer

Select an appropriate prayer from Appendix 2 to close the session.

After the Class

Review how the session went, and what should be done differently next time. If others are helping you with the class, make sure everyone knows who is responsible for what parts of preparing for and leading the next session.

Have someone from the class or planning group prepare a report to the congregation on a few key ideas or insights that have come out of this session, and share them through an announcement at worship, bulletin board display, or in next Sunday's bulletin or the church newsletter or website.

“In this study, we found that the more vegetation in a common space, the stronger the neighborhood social ties near that space. Compared to residents living adjacent to relatively barren spaces, individuals living adjacent to greener common spaces had more social activities and more visitors, knew more of their neighbors, reported their neighbors were more concerned with helping and supporting one another, and had stronger feelings of belonging.”

Frances E. Kuo, William Sullivan, Liesette Brunson, and Rebekah Levine Coley, researchers

Creation in the Church: Worship

Goals

- Appreciate how Jesus used examples from the familiar surroundings of his time and place to teach about God’s generosity and human responsibility.
- Become more aware of how your congregation can or does use aspects of its place in worship to encourage a sense of gratitude and responsibility to God.

Materials Needed

For the class:

- Bibles (or have participants bring their own)
- Flip chart
- Sheet of flip chart paper or whiteboard with two columns, “God’s Generosity” and “Human Accountability”

Introduction (5 min.)

Opening prayer:

Select an appropriate prayer from Appendix 1 to open the session.

Reporting:

Invite class members to share anything from their notebooks.

Introduce session:

In this session, we will explore how our worship can be enriched by connecting with our congregation’s sense of place. We will notice how Jesus used examples from the familiar surroundings of his time and place to teach about human beings’ relationship to God. And we’ll explore how our congregation can also use images or things or words about its place to help us be more aware of God’s gifts and our responsibilities.

“God likes matter. He invented it.” C. S. Lewis

Bible Study (20 min.)

The purpose of this exercise is to look at Jesus’ way of teaching to see how our awareness of our place, especially our natural environment, can deepen our understanding of our relationship to God.

Jesus used images of the ways that the people of his time and place experienced and interacted with nature – such as farming and sheep-herding – to teach about God. So, if we want to understand what Jesus is telling us about God, we have to understand what those images meant for his original audience.

Post or write the “God’s Generosity/Human Accountability” columns at the front of the class.

Explain that these refer to two key themes in Jesus' teachings in these passages:

- “God’s Generosity” - God’s gifts to us in creation, which demonstrate God’s gracious care for us;
- “Human Accountability” - Our responsibility for our actions within creation.

Ask seven members of the class to each read one of the following passages from the Gospel According to Matthew in their Bibles. After each passage is read, ask the class: What examples from nature or from human interactions with nature is Jesus using in these teachings?

Ask participants to list each passage under the heading it most clearly illustrates. (A suggested categorization is suggested by the letters “G” for “God’s generosity” and “H” for “human accountability” in the list above – but there is not necessarily a “correct” way to assign passages to the two headings – all imply human accountability in response to God’s generosity.)

1. Matthew 5:44-45 (sun and rain; G)

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

“ [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and an earth were created, things visible and invisible . . . – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Colossians 1:15-17

2. Matthew 6:25-34 (lilies of the field and birds of the air; G)

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you — you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

3. Matthew 12:33-34 (a tree is known by its fruit; H)

‘Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

4. **Matthew 13:3-9** (parable of the soils; H)

And he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!’

5. **Matthew 13:31-32** (mustard seed; G)

He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’

6. **Matthew 16:1-3** (weather forecasting; H)

The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, ‘When it is evening, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.” And in the morning, “It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.” You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

7. **Matthew 18:12-14** (parable of the lost sheep; H)

‘What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

Point out that the two themes are linked: human beings are to respond to God’s generosity with appreciation, responsible stewardship, and care.

God’s generosity is shown in the sun and the rain that are given to all people, whether righteous or unrighteous. The appropriate human response is to imitate God by showing love to all, even our enemies.

Jesus assumes that his hearers see and appreciate the beauty of nature. God’s generosity is shown in God’s “clothing” the wildflowers in beauty and feeding the birds. Humans, too, can count on God’s generosity. The appropriate human response is to trust and obey God, and not to anxiously grasp for wealth, security and possessions.

Note that Jesus’ parables and teachings, as well as much else in the Bible, presupposes an audience that was daily, directly, and intimately involved with and dependent on their immediate environment. Ask the class:

1. How would you contrast our experience of and interaction with the environment today with that of Jesus’ listeners?

In Jesus’ time, people were more directly aware of, involved with, and dependent upon their immediate environment than we seem to be today. Farming and shepherding were part of their everyday lives. They probably spent more time outdoors than we do, and worked more with animals. They had to gather wood for fires and get water from wells or streams. They knew they had to pay attention to the weather, the soil, the plants and animals around them, and respond appropriately, if they were to live well.

We are still deeply involved with and dependent upon our environment, locally and globally. But

our technology – buildings, heating and air conditioning, indoor plumbing, media, grocery stores, etc. – hide that dependence. We may have to stop and think to become conscious of how much, and in what ways, we are still dependent on nature.

2. How do you think this might affect our ability to fully appreciate either the images of nature and agricultural activity in the Bible, or the spiritual significance of the nature that surrounds us and our interactions with it?

The difference between our situation and that of Jesus' listeners may cause us to minimize the importance of Jesus' use of nature imagery. We may think it is just decorative, or focus simply on what it symbolizes about our relationships to God and to other people without recognizing that those relationships are interwoven with our relationships to the natural world.

We may not think of how our own experience of the beautiful and life-sustaining aspects of the natural world can enrich our understanding of God and our relationship to God. Our loss of contact with and awareness of the natural world may diminish our awareness of God's goodness and our responsibility to attend to and respect his creation.

3. What aspects of the creation around you speak to you most strongly about God's generosity and human responsibility?

God's generosity might be seen in particular examples of fertile farmland, blooming prairies, produce from vegetable gardens and fruit trees, places where you can view starry skies and breathe fragrant night air, clear streams or lakes, abundant and varied birds and other wildlife, sunlight on snow and ice...

Human responsibility may be reflected positively in examples of well-tended gardens, sustainable farming practices, wildlife sanctuaries, well-designed buildings and landscapes, functioning sanitation systems, solar panels and wind generators, recycling programs, well-cared for animals, and parks that provide healthy habitat for wildlife and are accessible to all sorts and classes of people...

Human responsibility can also be reflected negatively, by examples of irresponsible behavior: polluted streams, ozone alerts, litter, toxic waste sites, urban sprawl, blighted neighborhoods, ugly and poorly-planned developments, contaminated groundwater, eroded soil...

“I see that the life of this place is always emerging beyond expectation or prediction or typicality, that it is unique, given to the world minute by minute, only once, never to be repeated. And this is when I see that this life is a miracle, absolutely worth having, absolutely worth saving. We are alive within mystery, by miracle.”

Wendell Berry

Exercise (20 min.)

The purpose of this exercise is to help the class become more aware of how your congregation uses aspects of its place in worship, and how they might be used more effectively to encourage a sense of gratitude and responsibility to God. The class will be invited to “read” their worship space to see what it says about the relationship of their faith to the surrounding social and material world.

Bring the class into the sanctuary (if it is available; if not, ask them to answer from memory). Ask them:

1. What does the worship space convey about the world outside or about attitudes toward it?

Look for:

- a. Materials used;

Are they recognizably “natural” and expressive of their natural character (e.g., unpainted or unfinished stone, wood); transformed by human action but still recognizable in terms of their origin in natural materials (e.g., bare metal, colored glass, polished stone, carved and finished wood, beeswax candles)? Are they from local sources or in some way typical of the region? Or are they more totally synthetic (e.g., plastic, synthetic fabrics)?

The use of more “natural” materials may honor the beauty and goodness of the Creator’s work. Materials that have been shaped or manufactured by human art, craft, and technology may show appreciation for God-given gifts of human creativity, intelligence and imagination. They may also represent particular local or traditional styles of craftsmanship, or forms typical of other parts of the world or different ethnic cultures. In so doing, they express the congregation’s connection with its past, its surrounding community and with people and lands throughout the world.

“For lack of attention, a thousand forms of loveliness elude us every day.” Evelyn Underhill

- b. Images or symbols of nature or of human activities in creation;

Nature symbols may include: sun, stars, light, trees, vines, grapes, wheat, fish, dove, sheep, seeds, soil, and flames.

Symbols of human activities in creation may include: shepherding, fishing, farming, feeding or caring for other people. They may also include things made by people by transforming creation - loaves of bread, boats, buildings, books, cups.

Images from the Bible often reflect, directly or indirectly, the biblical witness to nature as God’s creation and human life as intimately bound up with creation (as discussed in relation to Psalm 104, Genesis 1 and 2, and the Sermon on the Mount earlier in this course). More contemporary images may emphasize the continuing relevance of the relationship between God, humanity, and nature in spite of dramatic changes in our technology and way of life.

- c. Real or artificial plants or other creatures;

While artificial plants are low maintenance, they don’t move people to wonder at God’s creativity or to love for creation the way real plants do. Even “uninvited” creatures - e.g., insects, mice - in a sanctuary, if they are noticed at all, are reminders that we humans are part of a much larger web of life. These beings, in their own way, are also seeking shelter and sustenance in God’s house.

- d. Clear or stained-glass windows and what is seen in or through them.

Stained glass windows can be abstract designs or include symbols and images such as those mentioned above. They celebrate light and color as elements of creation; but they can also create a feeling of being shut off from the outside world in a separate, special, sacred space. Clear windows, by contrast, emphasize the congregation's placement in its community and landscape. They may make visible certain features of its outside property and the creatures that live there, such as trees, gardens, gardens, and birds; the weather; or its parking lot, lights, and power and telephone lines -- which also say something about how it relates to its place. Neither clear nor stained-glass windows are necessarily "good" or "bad" – they just emphasize different sides of the Christian life as "in the world but not of it." The point is to be aware of what the sanctuary is "saying" about the congregation's relationship to its surroundings.

- e. Sounds, smells and textures.

Sometimes a sense of place is most strongly evoked by characteristic sounds and smells, which can evoke memories or bring information from the outside world (e.g., smell of pine trees, a nearby bakery or factory, flowers, damp earth). Texture is also an important aspect of the character of materials that can contribute to the distinctive character of the worship space. Smooth textures, like glass, varnished wood, polished metal, or silky fabrics may convey a sense of purity, lack of resistance, and peace; rougher textures, like unfinished timber, wrought iron, rough stone, or coarse linen may suggest hardship, humility, or earthiness.

2. Sacramental elements – water for baptism, wine and bread for communion – are among the materials from creation that are used in worship.

- a. Why do you think these material things are such an important part of the spiritual activity of Christian worship?

Though we may think of religion as a very "spiritual" matter, Christianity is a very "materialistic" religion. God is the creator of space and time, energy and matter, living and nonliving beings. We humans are created as physical beings, with bodily enjoyments, needs, and vulnerabilities. Christ came to us in the flesh, born of a woman, and died a physical death on the cross. While on earth, he ministered to people's material needs for food and health. Christian hope is the promise of the resurrection of the body and life in a new heaven and new earth. So it is not surprising that God's grace comes to us "in, with, and under" the water of the sacrament of Baptism and the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

- b. How would you describe the "life history" of these elements? How are other parts of creation involved in their production and transportation to the sanctuary?

Water, bread, and wine are not only examples of the material things we need to sustain our lives. They connect us in very particular and concrete ways to particular places and people whom we may or may not know.

They have their origin in some particular place in the natural world, and are brought to the sanctuary through human work and technology. The water of baptism has its source in some body of underground or surface water, and is brought to the church through the pumps and pipes installed and maintained by the local water utility. Grapes were grown and their juice fermented and bottled as wine, transported to the store by plane, train, and/or truck, sold and bought, and brought to the church. Bread was once wheat, grown and harvested, perhaps, with the aid of fertilizers, pesticides, and heavy machinery by farm workers; it was sold and ground into flour. The flour was mixed with water and yeast and other ingredients and turned into bread in a bakery and transported to a store, or it was baked in someone's home and brought fresh to church.

As the use of material elements – water, bread, wine – in the sacraments shows, our relationship

to God cannot be separated from our relationships to the earth and to other people and creatures. Our faith practices are supported by a wide-ranging web of social, economic, and ecological interdependence. A fitting response to the grace that comes to us in baptism and communion is helping to support, strengthen, and heal all that has made it possible for us to receive those sacraments.

- c. Are there occasions or seasons where other materials are brought into the worship space from outside? What materials, from where, and when?

Materials from the local area may include flowers from the garden (in spring and summer); garden produce (summer); gourds, winter squash, and stalks of wheat (fall harvest time and thanksgiving); evergreen trees (Advent and Christmas). Such items may help make connections between the seasons of the church year and the seasonal cycles of creation, as well as between the sanctuary and the surrounding landscape.

However, plants from florists or greenhouses, manufactured items like candles, communion ware, altar cloths, etc., are also evidence of the web of connections that stretch out from the sanctuary to the community and world beyond. Each has a history that crosses time and space. All have their origin in the resources of the earth, and have traveled from place to place; their production has had environmental impacts and many have been bought and sold as goods in the global economy.

3. What could be done in worship to emphasize the connection between the faith of your congregation and the created world outside its walls?

- *Preach on texts that praise God for creation, or that speak of creation's praise of God. Illustrate with examples from nature writers and poets who celebrate creation (e.g., Rachel Carson, Annie Dillard, Mary Oliver, Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry, John Muir).*
- *Use more examples and kinds of "natural" materials and images in the sanctuary. If they come from the church grounds, members' households, or other local sources, or from environmentally or socially responsible businesses, be sure that is publicly acknowledged.*
- *Use hymns about creation, or with strong creation imagery, throughout the year.*
- *Accompany a sermon, hymn, or psalm or Bible reading with projected images of creation, especially of the local creation.*
- *Hold a service outdoors, on the church property or in a neighborhood park or local conservancy area.*
- *Draw attention to nature images that are traditionally part of church festivals and seasons (Christmas, Lent, Easter, Thanksgiving, Advent, etc.*
- *Talk about creation's role in "setting the table" for communion and baptism.*
- *Make the praise of God for creation part of the prayers of the church.*
- *In the Kyrie and confession of sin, lament how environmental and human degradation diminishes the praise of God.*
- *For more ideas, see Appendix One.*

Conclusion (5 min.)

Thank the group, and remind them that the next session will focus on the community and landscape that form the context, the larger place of which their church is a part, physically and ecologically as well as socially and culturally.

For next session

Remind the class to revisit their “Why Place Matters to Me,” and “Why Place is a Faith Issue for Me,” worksheets.

Closing Prayer

Select an appropriate prayer from Appendix 2 to close the session.

After the Class

Review how the session went, and what should be done differently next time. If others are helping you with the class, make sure everyone knows who is responsible for what parts of preparing for and leading the next session.

Have someone from the class or planning group prepare a report to the congregation on a few key ideas or insights that have come out of this session, and share them through an announcement at worship, bulletin board display, or in next Sunday’s bulletin or the church newsletter or website.

*For the beauty of the earth
For the glory of the skies,
For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies.
Lord of all, to Thee we raise,
This our hymn of grateful praise.
For each perfect gift of Thine,
To our race so freely given,
Graces human and divine,
Flowers of earth and buds of Heaven.
Lord of all, to Thee we raise,
This our hymn of grateful praise.* Folliot S. Pierpoint

Seeking the Well-being of our Places

Goals

- Understand that God calls us to work for the well-being of our place, wherever we may be.
- Recognize the diverse qualities that we and other people in our congregation value about our place.
- Identify trends and developments that may affect those qualities in the future, and what people within our community are doing to maintain and improve our place, especially for those who don't fully enjoy its benefits and for those who will inhabit this place after us.

Materials Needed

For each participant:

- Paper and pen or pencil

For the class:

- Bibles (or have participants bring their own)
- Flip chart and masking tape
- Large map of the community (county or metro area or both)
- Small colored dot stickers
- Large sheet of paper with three questions written on it:
 - What do you love about your neighborhood?
 - What developments could diminish it?
 - What developments could improve it?

“God’s people in the earth must learn ... to love the world without idolatry and to hate the world without despair. One must hate the world enough to wish to change it; but he must love it enough to think it worth changing.”

Joseph Sittler

Introduction (5 min.)

Opening prayer:

Select an appropriate prayer from Appendix 1 to open the session.

Reporting:

Invite class members to share anything from their notebooks.

Introduce session:

At the beginning of this series, we focused on how the particular places of our everyday lives affect us and how we feel about them. In this session, we return to our experience of those places, but focusing on how we can affect them. Our stance will be more active and forward-looking. The basic question is: How might we take more responsibility for the places that are God's gifts to us? How can we be instruments for communicating God's gifts to our places and the people and other creatures that share them with us?

“To love a person or a place is to accept moral responsibility for its well-being”

Kathleen Dean Moore

Bible Study (10 min.)

The purpose of this exercise is to think about our responsibilities to the places where we live in the light of Scripture.

Ask someone to read **Jeremiah 29:4-14**.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

In the 7th Century B.C., the Babylonian Empire conquered much of the ancient Near East, including Judah (the southern Jewish kingdom). As punishment for unsuccessful attempts to revolt against

Babylon, many of the people of Judah were forced to leave their homeland and live in exile in Babylon. In this passage, the prophet Jeremiah is addressing those who were living in exile in Babylon – a foreign culture, and an empire that had conquered their homeland and uprooted and displaced many of its inhabitants. Ask the class to put themselves in the place of the exiles.

1. What attitudes would you expect them to take toward the city in which they were exiled?

You might expect that exiles would be hostile or indifferent to the communities in which they were exiled. These were not “their” people, and this was not the home place that they loved, the source of their identity and rootedness. The Babylonians were not only foreigners, with a different culture and religion. They were the enemy, the nation that had conquered Israel and torn the exiles away from their homeland. The exiles might have seen themselves as a separate community, and perhaps even set themselves in active opposition to the enemy’s city, working to undermine or overthrow it or hoping for its downfall. The “prophets and diviners” mentioned in the passage were some who promised an early return from exile, and incited the exiles to revolt against Babylon.

“What is the use of a House if you haven’t got a tolerable planet to put it on?”

Henry David Thoreau

2. How do these attitudes compare with the one that the prophet is recommending?

The prophet, instead, tells the exiles to care about the community where they find themselves, and to work actively for its well being. He says they are part of the city, that their lives and happiness are inseparable from it. The exiles have common concerns and share common ground with their “alien” neighbors.

3. How might the exiles benefit from the well-being of the city? Are there other reasons why they should “seek the welfare” of a strange city—that is, to actively promote its peace and prosperity?

The exiles are just as dependent on the proper functioning of the city as are the native inhabitants. If the city is unhealthy, full of crime and disorder, lacking basic necessities like food and water, or impoverished, the exiles will suffer. On the other hand, if the economy of the city thrives, if there is food and clean water and a safe and healthy environment within its walls, the exiles can live well.

But there is more than the exiles’ self-interest at stake. The Babylonians are God’s creatures, too, and the exiles’ neighbors whom they are to love. When they lived in their own land, the Israelites were told to be just and kind to the strangers and foreigners who lived among them. Now that the tables are turned, justice and kindness to those who are “other” is still appropriate.

4. How would you apply the prophet Jeremiah’s words to your congregation in its time and place?

Christians may sometimes feel like exiles surrounded by people with different – even offensive – values, beliefs, and lifestyles. Or, we may simply not feel a strong attachment to the place where we live because we don’t expect to stay very long, or because we feel more at home in a different kind of setting or region of the country. Even if we don’t feel so out of place in our communities, we may still need to be reminded that our own personal well-being depends on the well-being of the place where we live. Your congregations and its members are also affected by the quality of life, economic

vitality, and government services of your city or community. And the people who live there are also the neighbors whom Christ commands us to love. Your congregation, and its members, are also called to “seek the welfare” of your place.

Churches can contribute to the quality of life in their community in many ways:

- *Opening their building to schools, child-care, community organizations and cultural events;*
- *Providing or supporting services such as food pantries, tutoring, refugee resettlement, affordable housing, community meals, job-seeking assistance, counseling, and health care;*
- *Promoting awareness of public issues such as poverty, hunger, homelessness, environment, health care, or the needs of children, seniors, and the disabled;*
- *Being responsible stewards of their building and grounds, conserving energy and water, recycling, planting gardens, etc.;*
- *Advocating for laws and public policies that promote the common good of the community and protect its poor and vulnerable members.*

Exercise (30 min.)

The purpose of this exercise is to help the class think concretely and specifically about how God may be calling your congregation to respond to the gift of place – your local community and landscape. The map is to help us see our community more completely and objectively than if we just relied on our memories and impressions. We are exploring our personal likes, dislikes, hopes and fears about our place. However, using the map may remind us of aspects of that place we might otherwise overlook. It also provides a perspective on our community or area as a place we share with other members of the class, whether they live relatively near to or far from us, as well as people outside our congregation.

“It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality... . We aren’t going to have peace on Earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Mapping Activity (15 min.)

Spread out the community map or maps and have participants identify their own neighborhood with a colored dot.

Put up the large sheet of paper with the three questions on it. Ask the class to write on piece of paper three things about their neighborhood:

1. What do you most love or admire about it?

Thinking about what we value about our places can be a first step toward taking responsibility for our communities and landscapes. We are motivated to preserve, protect, and improve what we love.

“One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.” Aldo Leopold

2. What trends or developments in the next ten to fifty years can you imagine that would diminish the quality of your neighborhood?

You are not being asked to predict what will happen in the future, only to imagine what sorts of changes might take place in the future, and how they would affect the character and quality of life of your place.

These might include:

- a. *The decline of a local industry or relocation of businesses on which the community has been economically dependent;*
 - b. *Urban sprawl that consumes farmland, open space, wildlife habitat, and increases traffic congestion;*
 - c. *Increasing air and noise pollution;*
 - d. *Water pollution and water shortages;*
 - e. *Invasive species;*
 - f. *Deteriorating infrastructure (roads, bridges, water and sewage systems, communications, etc.) from excessive demand or lack of maintenance.*
 - g. *Persistent or increasing hunger, homelessness, and poverty.*
3. What trends or developments could improve the quality of your neighborhood?

These might include:

- a. *Regular neighborhood activities such as potlucks, park clean-ups, food pantry collections or clothing drives;*
- b. *Expanded transportation alternatives such as bike paths, community car, organized car pooling, or public transit;*
- c. *A multicultural center or annual multicultural festival;*

- d. Community gardens, rain gardens, prairie plantings, or habitat restoration;
- e. Farmers' markets and "Buy local" promotion to boost small businesses and farmers;
- f. Community forums on local environmental, social, and economic issues;
- g. Improved household and business water conservation practices;
- h. Economic development initiatives;
- i. Public participation in community planning and development decisions;
- j. Public policies to reduce pollution;
- k. Alternative, renewable, and nonpolluting technologies for producing energy.

Discussion (15 min.)

Ask each member of the class to describe their neighborhood and share their answer to the first question. As people mention things they value, write them (in one or two words if possible) on a page of the flip chart. When everyone has spoken, ask:

1. What similarities do you notice? What differences? Do people value similar things about different neighborhoods, or different things about similar neighborhoods?

When people value the same things about their place, they can cooperate on a common project to promote them. When they value different things, they may learn from each other new ways to enjoy and more reasons to appreciate their place. If the things they value are incompatible, it can be necessary to discuss and work through differences in perspective.

Then, ask each member of the class to share an answer to the second question. Again, as everyone mentions a trend, write it in a brief form on another page of the flip chart. When everyone has spoken, ask:

2. How many participants expect to stay long enough in their neighborhood that they could see those developments come to pass?

You may not expect to be around for the whole period (10-50 years) you are being asked to imagine. As stewards and caretakers of our places, we have the responsibility to maintain and enhance them for the sake of those who come after us. So you should think about what these trends might mean for the quality of life of anyone who might be living in your neighborhood in the future, including people who might come from other places or backgrounds.

“ Whether we and our politicians know it or not, Nature is party to all our deals and decisions, and she has more votes, a longer memory, and a sterner sense of justice than we do.” Wendell Berry

Finally, ask each person to share their answer to the third question, and write it in a brief form on a third page of the flip chart. Tape all three pages on the wall in front of the class. When everyone has spoken, ask:

3. What organizations, laws, programs, campaigns, movements, etc. can they identify in their

community that are addressing the trends that could diminish the quality of the environment and community life in their neighborhoods, or that are working to bring about more positive and creative developments? Is the congregation as a body or any of its members involved in any of these? Why or why not?

These might include:

- a. *Projects and programs to help neighbors in need, who may not have access to all the benefits of living in this good place: people who are hungry, homeless, illiterate, elderly, disabled; in need of health care or assistance in finding employment, overcoming alcoholism or other addictions, or reentering the community after incarceration; veterans facing challenges in returning to civilian life; children who need help with school or care while their parents are at work.*
- b. *Programs to build relationships among the people who share and enjoy this place: neighborhood associations, community centers, multicultural centers, anti-racism programs, arts programs, and programs for youth and seniors; local history and environmental education programs.*
- c. *Programs to involve people in working to enhance and protect this place: community gardens, community supported agriculture or local food buying co-ops; local nature conservancy areas or watershed education and protection groups; groups promoting energy or water conservation, rain gardens or wildlife habitat, public transportation, bike paths and walking paths.*

By participating in efforts to improve the quality of life in its community, the congregation and its members can preach the gospel not only by telling the Good News, but also by being “good news” through loving service.

By using its gifts of time, talents, and treasure to improve the quality of life for all the inhabitants of its place, a church becomes a channel for communicating God’s overflowing goodness. It witnesses to its faith in the Creator and Redeemer of all things by healing the land, providing healthy habitats for God’s creatures – human and nonhuman – and by protecting and enhancing the beauty of its corner of creation.

“We are looking ahead, as is one of the first mandates given us as chiefs, to make sure and to make every decision that we make relate to the welfare and well-being of the seventh generation to come... . What about the seventh generation? Where are you taking them? What will they have?”

Chief Oren, Onondaga Nation

Conclusion (5 min.)

Thank the group, and remind them that the next session will be the action planning session, and that it is very important for them all to be there, if at all possible.

“ Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.”

St. Francis of Assisi

Closing Prayer

Select an appropriate prayer from Appendix 2 to close the session.

After the Class

Review how the session went, and what should be done differently next time. If others are helping you with the class, make sure everyone knows who is responsible for what parts of preparing for and leading the next session.

Have someone from the class or planning group prepare a report to the congregation on a few key ideas or insights that have come out of this session, and share them through an announcement at worship, bulletin board display, or in next Sunday's bulletin or the church newsletter or website.

Think about whether there might be a specific topic that has raised enough interest in the group during this course to warrant a future study series or session.

*“ We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive at where we started
And know the place for the first time”*

T. S. Eliot

The Church Caring for its Corner of Creation: Action Planning

Goals

- Decide on a project your congregation can undertake to enhance the quality of its place for all of its inhabitants.
- Develop an action plan, with assigned responsibilities and a time line for specific tasks to begin carrying out the project.

Note: it would be helpful to have more than 50 minutes for this exercise. If possible, schedule this session for a time when people would be able to stay for a full hour or 90 minutes.

You will need to hold this session in a room where you can post several large sheets of paper.

Materials Needed

Sign-up sheets – One or more pads of lined paper (or lined paper on a clipboard) with columns marked “name,” “phone number,” “e-mail,” and “project”

A large flip chart (with easel or other stand) – use the kind that can be torn off the pad and stuck to a wall after they are filled out (or use masking tape to post them) – and different colored markers.

Write headings on five (or more) of the sheets:

- Gifts of Our Place (*with the following subheadings, or on separate sheets:*)
 - Church
 - Community
 - Creation
- Possibilities for our Place
- Challenges / Strategies (*Divided into two vertical columns under these two headings. You might want to have three or four of these sheets*)
- Next Steps (*Divided into three columns: What, Who, and When*)

Be sure to have a second pad or additional sheets available in case you need them.

Post the following from previous sessions where people can see them, but not where you will be creating the new lists this session:

- Lists from Session 2: Observations about the church building and grounds
- Lists from Session 3: What we can do in worship
- Lists from Session 4: Things we value about our neighborhoods; what developments may threaten them; what developments may enhance them

Introduction (5 min.)

Opening prayer:

Select an appropriate prayer from Appendix 1 to open the session.

Reporting:

Invite class members to share anything from their notebooks.

Introduce session:

Having explored and thought deeply about the gifts and potentialities of our congregation in its place, we are now going to move to acting on these gifts and realizing those potentialities. We will end up with an action plan that, when implemented, will enhance the quality of our community as a place for people – and other creatures – to experience the gifts of God’s creative and redemptive activity.

Brainstorming (40-80 minutes total)

Step 1: The Gifts of Our Place (5-10 min.)

Put up, or turn the flip chart to, the sheets labeled “Gifts of Our Place.” Ask the class to think back over the last four sessions (The sheets from the previous session are posted as reminders) and recall some of the things they appreciate and value about the congregation and its setting, including:

- a. The **church’s** building and grounds; its ministries to its members; its services to the community; the skills, interests, and involvements of its members, etc.
- b. The wider **community** – its institutions, organizations, services, businesses, people, cultural resources, etc.
- c. **Creation**, that is, the wider natural environment – city parks; local conservation areas; native plants and animals; working forests and farms; lakes, streams, rivers; wetlands or prairies; bluffs and valleys, etc.

Encourage people to be specific. It’s OK if they come up with things that haven’t been mentioned before. Write down their ideas in brief form. When finished, post the sheet(s) on the wall.

Step 2: Possibilities of Our Place (15-30 min.)

Put up the chart labeled “Possibilities of Our Place” and ask the class to name ways in which the congregation could help to celebrate, protect, enhance, or share the gifts mentioned. Encourage them to continue to be specific, and to think creatively.

These may include ways of:

- Increasing awareness, understanding, and appreciation for the gifts of place in members of the congregation or wider community;
- Communicating the gifts of nourishment, security, peace, community, health, joy, etc. that this place can offer to those who need them;
- Being better stewards of the gifts that this place offers – air, water, food, green space, habitat, beauty, diversity of cultures, plants, animals, and environments.

Each person can vote for up to three ideas as possible projects for the church to take on. The vote can be taken by a show of hands, or by giving each person colored dot stickers to place next to items on the list. Use a bright colored marker (different from the color used to write the list) to tally the votes and put a star by the three or four ideas with the most votes. When finished, post the sheet(s) on the wall.

Step 3: Challenges/Strategies (10-20 min.)

Put up, or turn the flip chart to, the sheet labeled “Challenges.” Without undermining the enthusiasm and energy of the group, note the importance of thinking in advance about any particular obstacles they might encounter in carrying out a project and to which they need to be prepared to respond.

For each of the starred project ideas from Step 2, ask the group to list possible obstacles, such as resistant attitudes in the congregation or community, lack of information, potential conflicts, or resource limitations. Write these in the first column under “Challenges.”

For each of these challenges, ask them to suggest strategies for overcoming or moving past those obstacles, such as raising funds or finding equipment to borrow, doing research, meeting with others to head off potential conflicts, education to overcome resistant attitudes, etc. Note each strategy opposite the challenge to which it responds.

Use separate sheets for each project if necessary. When finished, post the sheet(s) on the wall.

Step 4: Next Steps (10-20 min.)

Ask the members of the group to vote for one of the projects identified in Step 2, in light of the challenges and strategies identified in Step 3. On the basis of the vote (and further votes if necessary) select one project for the group to tackle. (Or two projects, if the group is large enough and there is sufficient energy and commitment for two separate teams.)

Put up, or turn the flip chart to, the sheet labeled “Next Steps.” Ask the group to identify the next actions that will have to be taken in order to begin the project, and write each in the “What” column.

For each action, identify one or more persons in the group who will take responsibility for seeing that it gets done, and write their name under “Who.” Then, have the group determine a deadline for completing that task.

Be sure that the list of tasks includes a meeting for those who have committed to the project to get together and report on their progress, bring in others who need or want to be involved, and plan further steps. Be sure to have names and contact information for everyone who will be working on the project. (If there are two projects, split the group and have each develop its chart of next steps, or arrange for a later meeting to organize the second project.)

Conclusion (5 min.)

Let everyone know that the conclusion of this study/action series is the beginning, not the end, and that all are encouraged to act on what they’ve learned. Thank everyone for coming to the class: their interest and participation has set the stage for the initiatives that will follow.

Closing Prayer

Select an appropriate prayer from Appendix 2 to close the course and launch the project.

After the Class

Review how the session went.

Have someone from the class or planning group prepare a report to the congregation on the project that has resulted from this series (and invite interested persons to the next project planning meeting), and share it through an announcement at worship, bulletin board display, or in next Sunday’s bulletin or the church newsletter or website.

Think about whether there might be a specific topic that has raised enough interest in the group during this course to warrant a future study series or session.

Make sure that you, or someone else from the planning group or class, will make sure that the project team has its follow up meeting and keeps the initiative moving forward.

Project Examples and Ideas

Note:

- These ideas are intended to be **suggestive**, not prescriptive, exhaustive or limiting.
- For links to resources mentioned here, visit www.XXXXXXXXXXXXXX.com or use an online search engine like Google.

A *Worship project* highlighting biblical themes of creation, land and place, and orienting congregation to care for and celebrate its local landscape and community:

- Celebrate the “Season of Creation” (a new liturgical season between Pentecost and Advent highlighting creation themes available from the Web of Creation website at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.
- Highlight place and creation themes throughout liturgical year:
 - Designs on banners, vestments and other material in the worship space depicting local flora, fauna, and landscapes;
 - Use native plants, rocks in altar decorations;
 - Prayers and liturgies expressing gratitude and care for creation and the local community.
- Hold an Adult Forum exploring the role of symbols and materials from creation in worship;
- Have special services several times throughout the year lifting up our relationship to our local landscape – for example on the feast day of St. Francis, Thanksgiving and the harvest season, Stewardship Sunday, Rogationtide (traditional blessing of the seeds and fields at spring planting time), Earth Sunday.
- Have an outdoor procession as part of the service that pauses and recognizes particular places or objects that represent God’s sustaining care and human responsibility or irresponsibility regarding the community and landscape.

An *Educational project* highlighting biblical theme of place and local place:

- Organize a study circle or reading group using the *Discovering a Sense of Place* or other guide from the Northwest Earth Institute, an anthology of Wisconsin or more local writers on place, or classics like Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac*, Ben Logan’s *The Land Remembers*, or August Derlith’s *Walden West*.
- Sponsor a speaker series on the land and people of the area, and invite members of the community.
- Organize a field trip to tour:
 - A conservation area;
 - A component of the community infrastructure – how energy and water are provided, or how waste is disposed of;
 - A Community Supported Agriculture farm;
 - Community gardens;

- A LEED certified Green building;
- An Environmental problem site;
- A local watershed.
- Create congregational EnAct Teams
- Engage confirmation students in community environmental service projects
- Create a display about the environmental and historical history of the area, or a booklet or website website. Interview older members of the community about their memories of the land and its people.
- Write a series of bulletin inserts or newsletter articles about appreciating and caring for your place.
- Collectively craft a statement of the congregation's theology and ethic of place, or convene an ecumenical or interfaith group of faith communities from your area to write on. (For a large-scale example, see "Crafting an Ethic of Place: The Columbia River Pastoral Letter Project" by John Rosenberg in the online Journal of Lutheran Ethics, Oct. 2003.
- Hold a congregational "BioBlitz" – an event where volunteers guided by experts do a thorough inventory of the creatures to be found on the church property in a day or less.
- Host a "World Café" discussion about sense of place around tables supplied with snacks from local food sources and pictures, artifacts, rocks, dried plants, etc. from the area.

A *Church property project* that gives particular attention to the church grounds and building as part of the community or to the congregation's physical impact on local environment:

- Turn part of the grounds into a:
 - Church-operated vegetable garden, and give the produce to local shelters, food pantries, or meal sites;
 - A prayer or meditation garden or labyrinth open to the public
 - Rain Garden
 - Orchard of fruit or nut trees
 - Wildlife habitat
- Green the church building:
 - Do an energy audit and install insulation, compact fluorescent lights, motion-sensitive light switches, natural lighting, programmable thermostats, etc., or undertake a major retrofit of the HVAC system;
 - Install an alternative energy system such as solar, geothermal, or wind;
 - Adopt environmentally friendly office products (e.g., recycled paper) and non-toxic cleaning and lawn care supplies.
- Serve as a role model for the congregation and community:
 - Put up signs to explain and draw attention to conservation behaviors on the church property (recycling bins, compact fluorescent lights, composting, rain garden, etc.) and link them to scriptures or church teachings about caring for creation.

A *Community service project* that enhances the contribution of the natural and/or built environment to the local community's quality of life and increases opportunities for people inside and outside the congregation to exercise environmental stewardship:

- Participate in or initiate activities to care for community places:
 - Invasive plant control;
 - Native plantings;
 - Trash clean up;
 - Water quality monitoring;
 - Habitat enhancement – birdhouses, bat-houses, butterfly houses, etc.;
 - Bird counts and other surveys;
 - Trail maintenance
- Link environmental activities to social ministry:
 - Grow vegetables for local meal site or food pantry;
 - Weatherize low income homes;
 - Offer community classes on gardening and how to cook with fresh vegetables;
 - Build a “green” habitat house;
 - Offer outdoor education and recreation opportunities for community children;
 - Participate in community-supported agriculture as a congregation;
 - Garden Swap: connect people who are too old to work their gardens to people who don't have a garden but want to work in one;
- Host or sponsor community educational events about:
 - Local or regional environmental and human history;
 - Connections between the local community and global social environmental issues such as climate change or tropical deforestation;
 - Household environmental practices such as lawn care, rain gardens, energy and water conservation.
- Be a community resource on your property:
 - Provide a recycling center for hard-to-recycle items such as compact fluorescent bulbs, batteries, or electronics;
 - Sell environmentally friendly, free trade, locally produced goods or host a farmers' market;
 - Turn part of your property into a community garden;
 - Organize tool and equipment sharing for the neighborhood.

An *Advocacy project* focused on local issues, local connections to global issues, or linkages between local environmental and local social issues:

- Provide educational background on public policy issues for the congregation or community:
 - Sponsor presentations by a local advocacy organization
 - Host public forums on local public policy issues such as:
 - Clean energy and climate change;
 - Land use planning;
 - Urban planning and historic preservation;
 - Public and regional transit;
 - Protecting air and water quality;
 - Providing affordable green housing;
 - Responding to immigration and demographic change;
 - Poor and minority communities' exposure to toxics;
 - Local food systems and food security;
 - Species and habitat protection;
 - Improving urban-rural relationships;
 - Sustainable agriculture policy and rural development.
 - Sponsor presentations highlighting global-local connections:
 - Connections between local and global economies;
 - Environmental and economic issues in E.L.C.A. partner synods or other areas with special church connections;
 - Immigrants/refugees and issues in homelands
- Encourage members to exercise their citizenship in relation to issues that affect the quality of their place through:
 - Writing, phoning, visiting or e-mailing their local, state, and federal representatives;
 - Sponsoring candidate forums on environmental and community quality of life issues during election years;
 - Writing letters to the editor or Op-Ed pieces for their local papers;
 - Participating in local environmental and social justice organizations.

APPENDIX TWO

Prayers

Selections from:

- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.
- Hamilton-Poore, Sam. *Earth Gospel: A Guide to Prayer for God's Creation*. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2008.
- *Harvest for the World: A worship anthology on sharing in the work of creation*. Compiled by Geoffrey Duncan. The Pilgrim Press, 2003.

Evangelical Lutheran Worship

STEWARDSHIP OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Almighty God, in giving us dominion over things on earth, you made us coworkers in your creation. Give us wisdom and reverence to use the resources of nature so that no one may suffer from our abuse of them, and that generations yet to come may continue to praise you for your bounty; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

CREATION AND NEW CREATION

Sovereign of the universe, your first covenant of mercy was with every living creature. When your beloved Son came among us, the waters of the river welcomed him, the heavens opened to greet his arrival, the animals of the wilderness drew near as his companions. With all the world's people, may we who are washed into new life through baptism seek the way of your new creation, the way of justice and care, mercy and peace; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

CREATION'S PRAISE

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ, who in your self-emptying love gathered up and reconciled all creation to the Father. Innumerable galaxies of the heavens worship you. Creatures that grace the earth rejoice in you. All those in the deepest seas bow to you in adoration. As with them we give you praise, grant that we may cherish the earth, our home, and live in harmony with this good creation, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Earth Gospel

THE ANGLICAN CHURCH IN AOTEAROA, NEW ZEALAND AND POLYNESIA

God of unchangeable power,
when you fashioned the world
the morning stars sang together
and the host of heaven shouted for joy;
open our eyes to the wonders of creation
and teach us to use all things for good,
to the honour of your glorious name;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

RAY SIMPSON, COMMUNITY OF AIDAN AND HILDA

We give you thanks
Because earth's life and fruitfulness flow from you
And all times and seasons reflect your laws.
We give you thanks
Because you created the world in love
You redeemed the world through love
You maintain the world by your love.
Help us to give our love to you.

GAIL A. RICCIUTI

For all things bright and beautiful,
For all things dark and mysterious and lovely,
For all things green and growing and strong,
For all things weak and struggling to push life up through rocky earth,
For all human faces, hearts, minds, and hands with surround us,
And for all nonhuman minds and hearts, paws and claws, fins and wings,
For all this Life and the life of this world,
For all that you have laid before us, O god,
We lay our thankful hearts before you. In Christ's name, Amen.

Help me, dear God,
to see my brother with the eyes of Christ,
to hear my sister with the ears of Christ,
to taste my neighbor's hunger with the mouth of Christ,
to smell creation's beauty with the nose of Christ,
to touch the world's pain with the hands of Christ
and to love life, each life, every life, with the heart of Christ.

IONA COMMUNITY

There is no pain in our hearts or in our planet
that you do not know,
for you have touched the lowest places on earth.

Teach us to grieve with you, O Christ,
the loss of all the beauty that is being killed.

There is no place in the heavens
that cannot be touched by your resurrection presence,
for you fill all things.

Give us strength in your victory over death
to grow into your way of love,
which does not despair but keeps sowing seeds of hope
and making signs of wholeness.

Under Christ's control
all the different parts of the body fit together
and the whole body is held together
by every joint with which it is provided.

Teach us to know our interconnectedness with all things.
Teach us to grow with each other
and all living creatures through love.

JURGEN MOLTSMANN

God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, triune God,
unite with yourself your torn and divided world,
and let us all be one in you,
one with your whole creation,
which praises and glorifies you
and in you is happy. Amen.

ANNE ROWTHORN

Blessed are you,
God of growth and discovery;
yours is the inspiration
that has altered and changed our lives;
yours is the power that has brought us
to new dangers and opportunities.
Guide us in your holy creation,
to walk through this world,
watching and learning,
loving and trusting,
until the coming of your reign. Amen.

You are God – not me, not us;
help me to remember this simple fact each day.
You are the Center of creation – not me, not us;
help me to recognize my place within the orbit of your grace.
You are the Source of all life – not me, not us;
let me find in you my kinship with all creation.

THE ROYAL SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS

Holy Father,
your Son, Jesus Christ
is the reconciler of all things
in heaven and on earth;
send us your Spirit
that we may be made one
with all your creatures,
and know that all things
come from you,
through you,
and belong to you
now and forever.

Every day, every passing second,
your grace, like water, is on the move –
bringing new life,
baptizing your creation.
Immersed in your Spirit,
may I move within the cycle
of your love,
giving my life, like water,
to any who thirst.

ANDREW LINZEY

Holy God
you alone
can make all things new;
send your Holy Spirit
upon us;
give us new hearts to feel,
new ears to hear,
new eyes to see
the unity of
all creatures
in Christ;
and to proclaim
all living beings
as fellow creatures
with us in your
wonderful creation.
Amen.

JANET MORLEY

God of wholeness,
you have created us bodily,
that our work and faith may be one.
May we offer our worship
from lives of integrity;
and maintain the fabric of this world
with hearts that are set on you,
through Jesus Christ, Amen.

WALTER RAUSCHENBUSCH (1861-1918)

O God, we thank you for this earth, our home; for the wide sky and the blessed sun, for the salt sea and for the running water, for the everlasting hills and the never-resting winds, for trees and the common grass underfoot.

We thank you for our senses by which we hear the songs of birds, and see the splendor of the summer fields, and taste of the autumn fruits, and rejoice in the feel of the snow, and smell the breath of the spring.

Grant us a heart wide open to all this beauty; and save our souls from being so blind that we pass unseeing when even the common thorn-bush is aflame with your glory, O God our creator, who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

RUBEN ALVES

Lord: Help us to see in the groaning of creation
not death throes but birth pangs;
helps us to see in suffering a promise for the future,
because it is a cry against the inhumanity of the present.
Help us to glimpse in protest the dawn of justice,
in the Cross the pathway to resurrection,
and in suffering the seeds of joy.

IONA COMMUNITY

O God, for your love for us, warm and brooding,
which has brought us to birth and opened our eyes
to the wonder and beauty of creation,
we give you thanks.

For your love for us, wild and freeing,
which has awakened us to the energy of creation:
to the sap that flows,
the blood that pulses,
the heart that sings,
we give you thanks.

O God, we ... celebrate
that your Holy Spirit is present deep within us,
and at the heart of all life.
Forgive us when we forget your gift of love
made known to us in Jesus,
and draw us into presence.

Harvest for the World

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

We believe that creation is a gift of God,
an expression of our Creator's goodness.
We believe that as human beings we are part of this creation,
and that we share in a special way in the creative power of God.
We believe that the resources of our land and waters and air
are precious gifts from our Creator,
to be used and looked after with loving care.
We believe that there is a rhythm to God's creation, like a drum beat;
when we lose the beat, or the drum is damaged, the music is out of tune.
The Pacific Women's Consultation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

AWARENESS

Creator of heaven and earth,
from the nearest flower in the garden
to the farthest galaxy in the universe, broaden our minds
to grasp the connectedness of all created things.

As our knowledge expands
to probe more and more into the secrets of life,
as our communications improve
to see at first hand what is happening far away,
help us better to understand the links between past and present
and between events and trends the world over.

Remind us that just as ocean currents in the Pacific
affect the weather over England
and chemicals we put into the air
affect the ozone layer over the Antarctic
so our lives are conditioned by events
in other countries and other cultures
and everything we do has reverberations for the rest of humankind.

Alan Litherland

PRAYER IN THE ORCHARD, BIBLE AND PRAYER GARDENS

O God, may our stillness and peace
rest upon our garden and orchard
and upon all who come to it.
May your presence permeate it,
your blessing be upon this place
and on those who tend it with love and reverence.
May fruit and flowers be brought forth in abundance
in our garden and within the garden of our hearts.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Community of the Sisters of the Church

ALL YOU HAVE GIVEN

Based on Philippians 4:4-20; 1 Peter 4:7-11

All you have given calls us, Lord, to praise you –
Abundant wealth through Jesus Christ our Lord –
Your peace to guard our hearts in times of trouble;
Our needs supplied, our broken strength restored.

Teach us to use your varied gifts with wisdom,
Sharing with others for the good of all;
May we delight in giving and receiving,
And hold each other up, that none may fall.

To you, our God and Father, be the glory,
For in all things the praise belongs to you;
We pledge our thankful service to your people,
That we may show your love through what we do.

Tune: Highwood, Jenny Dann

GRACE

Give us, we pray, a loftier view of life
That we may watch the Earth
Upon its axis turn –
That we may not forget
How rains may flow to flood
And sun relentless burn...
And harvests fail...

Thus may we now give thanks
For all Earth's goodness set
Before us here –

And in this moment's quiet space
Together met,
We beg that you, who generous gives,
Accept our simple, humble grace.
Amen.

Margot Arthurton

GOD, MAKER AND BREAKER OF BREAD

Breadmaking God,
providing food for your children
with an abundance that surpasses our hopes,
we praise you.

**God, Maker and Breaker of Bread,
feed and nourish us with your love.**

Breadmaking God,
working with those who sweat and struggle
to provide food and nourishment for the hungry,
bring justice to your world.

**God, Maker and Breaker of Bread,
feed and nourish us with your love.**

Breadmaking God,
hearing our greedy clamour for more,
our desire for possessions surplus to our needs,
forgive us.

**God, Maker and Breaker of Bread,
feed and nourish us with your love.**

Breadmaking God,
offering us the bread of life,
mysterious in its brokenness,
feed us.

**God, Maker and Breaker of Bread,
feed and nourish us with your love.**

Jan Berry

SEEDTIME AND HARVEST

God of yesterday, today and tomorrow,
God of seedtime and harvest,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
bless us and strengthen us
to live and blossom and bear good fruit
to his praise and glory.

Dorothy Stewart

SPIRIT OF CREATION AND COMMUNITY

Let us give thanks to the Spirit
whose restless energy dances through all creation.

**Spirit of creation and community
we celebrate your power.**

Let us give thanks to the Spirit
whose tender embrace gives birth to our longing.

**Spirit of creation and community
we celebrate your power.**

Let us give thanks to the Spirit
whose urgent voice summons us to justice.

**Spirit of creation and community
we celebrate your power.**

Let us give thanks for the first-fruits of the earth
and rejoice in the Spirit who gives bread for our hunger.

**Spirit of creation and community
we celebrate your power.**

Let us give thanks for the cup of salvation
and rejoice in the Spirit who gives wine for our sharing.

**Spirit of creation and community
we celebrate your power.**

Let us give thanks for the food of today
as we long for the feasting of all creation.

**Spirit of creation and community
we celebrate your power.**

Jan Berry

CONCLUDING PRAISE

We give thanks for food, the life-giver.
We give thanks for land, and the turning of seasons.
We give thanks for those who toil for our convenience.
And we commit ourselves to act thankfully and thoughtfully,
in the products we buy, the amount we pay,
the places we shop.
We commit ourselves to God's Harvest –
the gathering, in love, of all that is good.
We commit ourselves to Jesus, the seed of God,
crushed and broken for this world,
that the Harvest may be glorious.

Blessing:

May you let the Spirit of God tend you.
May the seed of Jesus grow within you, strong and true.
May God the Father bring your fruit to maturity,
And may the love of God multiply,
forty, sixty, one hundred fold,
through all you do.

Amen

Duncan L. Tuck

THE CELEBRATION OF HARVEST IS A CELEBRATION OF THE CYCLE OF LIFE

Leader:

God of Life, We live in your world with its seasons and cycles.
Day by day you nurture the life within us carefully encouraging growth,
that we might bloom where we are planted and produce a rich harvest from our lives.

Response: Life-giving God, grow in us.

Leader:

God of the Harvest, At harvest time, help us to celebrate the letting go,
keeping only what's needed to sow the next crop.
In the fallow time that follows, allow us time
for dreaming about what might be and to prepare the fertile soil of our minds.

Response: God of the Harvest, help us to let go.

Leader:

God of New Life, Plant new seed within us
and work your resurrection miracle as you bring again new signs of life.
Let your quiet energy flow through our being,
working unseen, growing new ideas and new ways.

Response: God of New Life, let your energy flow through us.

All: Living God, help us to celebrate the cycle of life with us, and the harvest it brings.

Amen

The Uniting Church in Australia

APPENDIX THREE

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Why Place Matters to Me

Use the space provided to make notes about:

- Which of these issues are of concern to you? Why?
- Can you give examples from your own experience, news items, etc.?
- Are there any of these criticisms of modern life that you disagree with or don't understand?
- Can you think of any other place-related concerns?
- What social movements or organizations do you know of that are trying to counter any of these trends?
- Any other comments or reflections?

Use additional sheets of paper if necessary.

<p>1. Our automobile-centered society pollutes the air. Paved surfaces cover fertile soil, and increase erosion and water pollution from runoff. Urban sprawl is often ugly, wastes land and draws people, businesses and resources away from downtowns. Without public transportation, people may lack access to jobs and necessities.</p>	
<p>2. Our present-day lifestyle harms human health. As we spend more time in cars, we create more air pollution, exercise less and eat more fast food. Children spend more time indoors and get less exercise from playing outside.</p>	

3. Wildlife habitat is being lost to pollution, development, and climate change.

4. There are toxics in our homes, workplaces, communities, and natural environment as a result of stormwater runoff, lawn care chemicals, household cleaners, agriculture, and local industries.

<p>5. We no longer know where our food comes from or how it is grown and processed. Fewer people today raise their own food, live on farms, or hunt and fish to feed themselves.</p>	
<p>6. There is greater mobility and transience in our lives as people move frequently, which can lead to a sense of rootlessness.</p>	

7. The speed and busyness of modern life distracts us from the people and things around us.

8. Urbanization, media, and technological conveniences lessen our awareness of our interdependence with people and nature.

<p>9. People withdraw from the public sphere into private consumption, “home entertainment systems” and interact only with those of similar backgrounds and viewpoints. As a result, our political life becomes fragmented into competing interest groups, with a diminished sense of community and the common good.</p>	
<p>10. The global economy disrupts local economies, erodes cultural diversity, diminishes local control, and consumes fossil fuels to move people and goods.</p>	

11. Other concerns:

Why Place is a Faith Issue for Me

Use the space provided to make notes about:

- Which of these biblical themes make sense to you?
- Can you think of Bible verses that apply?
- Can you illustrate them from your own experience, news items, etc.?
- Are there any of these themes that you don't understand, or interpretations that you disagree with?
- Can you think of any other place-related biblical themes?
- Any other comments or reflections?

Use additional sheets of paper if necessary.

<p>1. All that sustains and enriches our lives are gifts from God. Appreciation for these gifts moves us to gratitude to God, and to understand them, care for them, protect them, cultivate them, and share them with others.</p>	
<p>2. Love God, love your neighbor. Loving God the Creator means appreciating and caring for what God has made here and now. Attending to the neighbor's need for sustenance, community, creativity, contemplation, and joy requires intelligent and caring attention to the local sources of those needs.</p>	

3. Adam was placed in the garden to till and keep it. We, too, have the vocation of tending the corner of creation where God has placed us. We are to be responsible stewards not only of our personal possessions, but of the “common wealth” and “common ground” that we share with our neighbors and nonhuman fellow creatures.

4. Creation and redemption, spirituality and daily life, belong together. Our places are where we most directly encounter God’s creative and redeeming work and where we act out the grace we have received through word and sacrament. Slowing down and paying attention to our surroundings awakens us to the grace of God in the here and now.

Questions for Inside the Building

- What is the function of this space? What features enable it to serve this function, or inhibit it?
- What features of the space are part of the connection between the building and the outside world? (Doors, windows, faucets, electric lights or outlets, trash/recycling receptacles, etc.) Do they tend to reveal or to obscure the connection between inside and outside?
- Are there any materials or objects in the space that you would identify as “natural” (not manufactured or painted), or whose origin you can identify, whether local or otherwise? Anything artificial that imitates or represents a natural object? Are there any items that are difficult to categorize as either “natural” or “artificial”?
- How would you describe this place in terms of the feelings it evokes – is it attractive or ugly, open or cramped, busy or quiet, etc.? Is there anything that particularly drew you to this location for this exercise?
- What signals are there inside the building of its location in the world/country/state? I.e., what does this building tell you about where it is? Its history?
- Is there anything particularly interesting or surprising about this space that you haven’t noticed before? Photograph it or sketch it. If you have a magnifying glass, use it to see if there’s something interesting at a smaller scale than you’re used to looking at.

Questions for Outside the Building

- What function, if any, does the space have? Is it used in any way (storage, sidewalk, cemetery, etc.)? Or decorative (e.g., flower bed)? Or just “leftover” space (if so, what defines its boundaries)? Does this part of the church grounds contribute anything useful or beautiful to the congregation or to the community?
- How would you describe this place in terms of the feelings it evokes – is it attractive or ugly, open or cramped, busy or quiet, drab or stimulating, etc.? Is there anything that particularly drew you to this location for this exercise?
- Are there any materials or objects in the space that you would identify as artificial that imitates or represents a natural object? Are there any items that are difficult to categorize as either “natural” or “artificial”?
- What plants, animals, insects, rocks, soil types, etc. can you find? Use a magnifying glass to examine details or to find small Can you identify them? Are there any that are characteristic of this part of the country or state? Any that you can relate to biblical texts? Photograph, sketch, or write a description to share with others to see if they can help you identify them.
- Close your eyes. What do you hear, smell, or feel in this spot?
- Is there anything particularly interesting or surprising about this space that you haven’t noticed before? Photograph it, sketch it, or write a description. If you have a magnifying glass, use it to see if there’s something interesting at a smaller scale than you’re used to looking at.

NOTES

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