

“Earth Stewardship and the *Missio Dei*:  
The Leadership of Integrating Congregations”

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Abstract:

The widespread and systemic problems of the ecological crisis call for adaptive changes not only in society but also in the church, especially if it is to provide faithful leadership in addressing them. Congregational initiatives toward more earth-redemptive practices, grounded in scripture and theology, and informed by environmental and social sciences, can come from a variety of leaders, from pastors and property managers to musicians and children. Lasting change is most promising when congregations cultivate a view of earth stewardship not as one ministry among many but as *integral to each faith practice*, lived out in worship, service, study, and witness as a vital component of the church’s identity and vocation today. The presenter’s recent doctoral thesis found that *integrating congregations* (those with creation care teams) were able to deepen and broaden *personal* participation with creation care through *congregational* and *community* engagement, even when there were risks. Through cultivating awareness, belonging, and vocation, these congregations built new relationships and grew in understanding their local earth stewardship as a component of participating in God’s mission.

Creation care, if it is a ministry emphasis at all, often falls under the particular congregational concern of stewardship. Yet when the well-being of all creation is woven into the life, practice, and decisions of the church, it can inspire initiatives from a variety of leaders, from pastors and property managers to musicians and children.

For example, our congregation puts out a food waste bin during coffee hour and other church functions, and we give compostable bags to people to try it at home. Sometime after this became routine in congregational life, a third grader came to me. It was September and school was starting. She noticed that the practice at her school lunchroom was different from home and church—food scraps were going in the garbage along with everything else, “including sporks!” We wrote a letter to the principal together, and after an initial meeting with her began a green team at the school composed of parents and students. Since then, they have not only implemented food waste composting into the school lunchroom but have also reclaimed a green space across the street and have partnered with a local paper mill to raise extra school funds by collecting shiny paper.

Composting food waste may seem like a thankless task, but in the context of the church’s worship and discipleship, it helped cultivate a broader vision of God’s redeeming love and enabled a third grader to act boldly as a participant in it. Building relationships in the community around this shared value was a notable corollary. If creation care is seen not as an add-on to current ministries but as leaven that influences the whole culture of a congregation, then its missional significance has greater potential.

The widespread and systemic problems of the ecological crisis call for adaptive changes not only in society but also in the church, especially if it is to provide faithful leadership in addressing them. This paper, which draws from my recent D.Min. thesis,<sup>1</sup> highlights the leadership of integrating congregations, those that cultivate a view of earth stewardship not as one ministry among many but as integral to every aspect of ministry. We begin first by exploring how the increasingly urgent need for an integrative approach to earth-redemptive practices is informed by environmental and social sciences, and is grounded in scripture and theology. We then look at examples of integrating congregations in practice.

### **Theoretical roots for thinking holistically about earth stewardship**

Three key theoretical perspectives influenced the research design of my thesis and inform an integrated approach for earth stewardship in congregations: sustainability, globalization, and global civil society. Together, they enable the church to see its creation care practices and perceptions in conversation with scientific findings and within a wider context of organizations and global factors.

#### *Sustainability*

The scientific framework for understanding sustainability and making sustainable decisions developed by The Natural Step provides a helpful systematic approach to organizational change.<sup>2</sup> Originally conceived in 1988 by Swedish oncologist Karl-Henrik Robert, this framework evolved through a process of consensus building with scientists and business people, engagement of households and schools across Sweden, and continued refinement through international dialogue, pilot projects, case studies, and trainings.<sup>3</sup> Many organizations, businesses, and municipalities have

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<sup>1</sup> David M. Carlson, “Earth Stewardship and the *Missio Dei*: Participating in the Care and Redemption of All God Has Made” (Luther Seminary, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Karl-Henrik Robert, *The Natural Step: A Framework for Achieving Sustainability in Organizations*, Innovations in Management Series, edited by Kellie Wardman O’Reilly (Cambridge, MA: Pegasus Communications, Inc., 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Karl-Henrik Robert, *The Natural Step Story: Seeding a Quiet Revolution* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2002).

participated in The Natural Step training worldwide.<sup>4</sup> The Natural Step views the ecosphere as a system of biological cycles supported by geological cycles in which all human activity occurs, and it defines sustainability as ensuring the welfare of those processes so that human society can exist indefinitely within them. Here is how the Natural Step outlines the necessary and sufficient conditions to achieve sustainability:

To become a sustainable society we must eliminate our contributions to ...

1. the *systematic increase* of concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's crust (e.g., heavy metals and fossil fuels)
2. the *systematic increase* of concentrations of substances produced by society (e.g., plastics, dioxins, PCBs and DDT)
3. the *systematic* physical degradation of nature and natural processes (e.g., over harvesting forests, destroying habitat and overfishing); and ...
4. conditions that *systematically* undermine people's capacity to meet their basic human needs (e.g., unsafe working conditions and not enough pay to live on).<sup>5</sup>

By connecting the system conditions to such examples, we can begin to see the implications for congregations seeking to assess the direct ecological impact (positive and negative) of individual and congregational practices. For example, replacing a church furnace with a more efficient one, recycling, composting food waste, serving fair trade coffee, and advocating for social justice can be seen as assets to meeting one or more of the system conditions. The unsustainability of certain practices can also be understood more objectively through system conditions that are well-defined.

Congregations seeking to integrate earth stewardship into their ministries may also benefit from another sustainability concept, sometimes elaborated through the phrase "triple bottom line," coined by John Elkington, who suggests that businesses must measure their success in terms of *3 E's* (or *3 P's*): not only with the conventional bottom line of financial or *Economic* performance (expressed as Profits), but also by their impact on the *Environment* (or Planet) and concerns of social *Equity* (i.e., People).<sup>6</sup> Here we see the connection of social equity to the fourth system condition of sustainability in The Natural Step. Working often with corporations, proponents of sustainable development try to dispel the myths that sustainability is bad for business and will only cost more. Former IBM executive Bob Willard, for example, cites several case studies in which implementing systematic changes toward the sustainable principles in The Natural Step has, in the long run, lowered costs and increased social well-being while helping the environment.<sup>7</sup>

*Nested circles* best illustrate this triple emphasis, with the economy as a subset within society, and society as embedded in the (natural) environment (figure 1).

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<sup>4</sup> These include Whistler, BC, Madison, WI, Duluth, MN, and Swedish eco-municipalities, as well as businesses like IKEA and Panasonic, nonprofit organizations, and foundations.

<sup>5</sup> The Natural Step, "The Four System Conditions of a Sustainable Society," The Natural Step, <http://www.thenaturalstep.org/sustainability/the-system-conditions/> (accessed March 20, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> John Elkington, *Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business*, Conscientious Commerce (Gabriola Island, BC; Stony Creek, CT: New Society Publishers, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Bob Willard, *The Sustainability Advantage: Seven Business Case Benefits of a Triple Bottom Line* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2002).

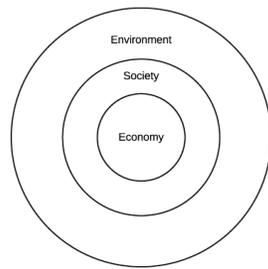


Figure 1. Nested Circles

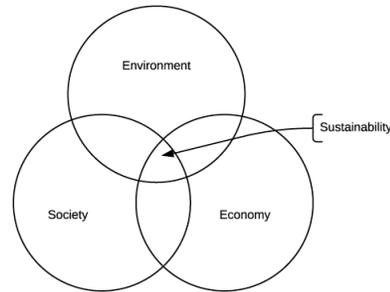


Figure 2. Conventional Model

A conventional model of circles with those same entities depicts sustainability as where the three overlap (figure 2). But as Willard points out, a circular model with overlapping arcs wrongly assumes that there are places where the economy exists independently from the society and the environment.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, the nesting image properly places the economy and society as existing within and depending on the ecosphere. As the economic subsystem gets larger, its impact on society and natural systems increases. At the same time, societies on which economic models depend can change them if they are not working equitably or sustainably.

The nested circles model helps cultivate a broader picture of the society and the ecosphere as the location in which the church does *every aspect of ministry*. It supports spatially the idea that all faith practices are done within the context of creation and that attention to our relationship with creation is integral to everything we do as church. Those who already see a connection between faith and social justice, for example, can be encouraged to see those concerns embedded in the larger sphere of creation justice.

### *Globalization*

We live in a world increasingly connected and influenced by political, cultural, and economic forces. The effects of globalization have promoted international cooperation, cross-cultural understanding, and the emergence of a global consciousness, whereby people look beyond individual, tribal, and national concerns to one world shared by all. But the meaning and impact of globalization represent different realities to different people, depending on their social location. For congregational practice, a key to this concept is recognizing the interdependence of local and global spheres of influence.

Christianity has already played a significant role in globalization, though some models of the church's worldwide mission, based largely on the Great Commission from Matthew 28, have operated symbiotically with colonialism and dominant, paternalistic theories of globalization. As theologians Neil Ormerod and Shane Clifton observe,

Christianity is not a spectator to globalization but one of its agents, one of the forces at work which have extended interconnection between peoples, shared ideas and promoted social, political and cultural links. Some have even “credited” Christianity with the rise of capitalism in the West.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Bob Willard, “3 Sustainability Models,” Sustainability Advantage, <http://sustainabilityadvantage.com/2010/07/20/3-sustainability-models/> (accessed March 16, 2015). See also Willard, *The Sustainability Advantage: Seven Business Case Benefits of a Triple Bottom Line*, 146.

<sup>9</sup> Neil Ormerod and Shane Clifton, *Globalization and the Mission of the Church*, Ecclesiological Investigations 6 (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), viii.

What is needed, they rightly suggest, is “a critique of the way in which the political, economic and technological dimensions of globalization are giving rise to injustice, poverty and environmental destruction, and an affirmation of how they can be reframed to reverse the problem.”<sup>10</sup>

*In Search of the Good Life: The Ethics of Globalization* by Rebecca Todd Peters provides an excellent evaluation of four theories of globalization from a Christian feminist perspective.

Simply stated, the version of globalization that we embrace—as people, as countries, as institutions, as businesses—has profound implications for how planetary, cultural, and human survival will take place in the twenty-first century.<sup>11</sup>

Peters concludes that the two dominant theories of globalization—neoliberalism and social development—are based on a capitalist model of industrialization that is environmentally unsustainable. Pursuing these theories has privileged developed countries, favored experts rather than local community leaders, resulted in gross economic inequalities, and placed a heavy burden on indigenous peoples and on the biosphere. However, she argues, a serious engagement with the two resistance theories—earthism and post-colonialism—could help transform globalization’s future toward a democratized understanding of power, caring for the planet, and the social well-being of all people.

It is critical for Western human society to work toward a transformation of our worldview that will allow us to see other species, as well as the natural resources of our ecosystem, not as objects, but as subjects that possess an intrinsic value that qualifies any instrumental value they might hold for human purposes.<sup>12</sup>

Earthist proponents challenge the *anthropocentrism* that ignores human interdependence with all life and call for a future of smaller economies that prioritize a turn toward *bioregionalism* and cultivating local relationships between producers and consumers. Post-colonialists challenge the power of multinational corporations and of global Americanizing trends that devalue the uniqueness of local cultures. In response, they reinterpret globalization as global solidarity, championing the awareness of human diversity and of peoples’ movements where strength is rooted in the autonomy and moral agency of the community.

Many congregations have global connections through companion church relationships, missionary support, and disaster relief. The concept of globalization invites congregations to consider how their own worldviews, actions and inactions, and resource consumption not only impact human society and the environment locally but also have global consequences.

#### *Global civil society*

Along with globalization, considering the realm of civil society – the realm of non-profits and nongovernment organizations – helps cultivate an integrated approach to congregational earth stewardship. On the one hand, it points to environmental organizations that could be potential partners for congregations in caring for creation. At the same time, it describes how some secular institutions categorize religious organizations and describe their service and community building—as part of civil society.

For example, the Center for Civil Society Studies at Johns Hopkins University has provided notable leadership in researching the interplay of government, business, and civil society organizations to address public problems. Since 1991, its Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Todd Peters, *In Search of the Good Life: The Ethics of Globalization* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 27.

(CNP) has collected data on the role of nonprofit organizations and their local significance in a growing number of countries.<sup>13</sup> It lists several areas of ecological work by nonprofits: pollution abatement, natural resource conservation and protection, environmental beautification, animal welfare, and wildlife sanctuary. Such categories invite congregations to imagine acting in cooperation with civil society organizations in their local areas to create a more ecologically stable future.

Yet the CNP listing of congregations and associations of congregations *as* nonprofits also helps identify them with other insights from the Center for Civil Society Studies that further describe their role. In analyzing the characteristics and impact of nonprofits, for example, the CNP suggests five “hypothesized contributions” of nonprofits: providing direct services, leading innovation, advocating, expressing values, and building community.<sup>14</sup> Mary Sue D. Dreier utilized this CNP framework to study the functional contributions of congregations in civil society and found them evident in varying degrees in each congregation studied.<sup>15</sup> I believe this framework could also be extended beyond meeting social needs to addressing ecological needs.

For example, congregations act as ecological *service providers* when adopting a highway to clean up or installing solar panels to generate renewable energy. They act as *innovators* in their communities by identifying unaddressed environmental problems and by being on the early end of adopting ecologically sustainable practices like food waste composting. Congregations act as *advocates* on behalf of the whole creation in writing or speaking to elected leaders about ecological concerns. They function as *values guardians* by expressing the inherent value of God’s creation through special worship services as well as regular worship and prayer, scriptural study and interpretation, and explicitly connecting earth stewardship to the faith formation of children and leaders. Congregations act as *community builders* by hosting conversations about environmental issues in their contexts, seeing everyone in their community as a potential partner in earth stewardship, and modeling graceful engagement of those who may vocalize other opinions.

Dreier asserts that congregations’ intentional public companionship in civil society is “a component of becoming the missional church which God is creating in this present era of mission” and “formative as God develops a congregation’s vocational identity.”<sup>16</sup> By asking what God is up to in their local context as well as in the world, congregations broaden the scope of their theology and practice. Here is potential for enhancing the missional imagination of the church to reach beyond itself and participate in what God may be doing to care for creation in its community.

Together, sustainability, globalization, and civil society help the church to recognize the urgency and complexity of the issues facing the planet and also to imagine possibilities for ecological innovation and collaboration. More importantly, they remind the church of the broad arena in which God is at work and compel us to participate with God at local and international levels in the care and redemption of all God has made.

### **Biblical and theological roots for thinking holistically about earth stewardship**

I emphasize two biblical concepts and an additional theological concept—all involving reciprocal relationships—to support an integrated approach to earth stewardship. The first is a relationship between human beings and *nature as an active subject*, an important biblical contrast to

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<sup>13</sup> Center for Civil Society Studies, “Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project,” Johns Hopkins University Center for Civil Society Studies, <http://ccss.jhu.edu/research-projects/comparative-nonprofit-sector-project/> (accessed March 30, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Lester M. Salamon, Leslie C. Hems, and Kathryn Chinnock, “The Nonprofit Sector: For What and for Whom?” *Working Papers of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project*(2000): 5-7, <http://ccss.jhu.edu/publications-findings/?did=115>(accessed March 16, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Mary Sue D. Dreier, “Five Congregations and Civil Society: An Imagination for God's World” (Unpublished Essay, Required reading for course CL7531 at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN in spring 2013.).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

anthropocentrism and the modern industrial objectification of nature. The second is a relationship whereby Jesus Christ draws the church to participate in God's *stewardship*. A third, theological concept—*perichoresis*—provides more grounding for reciprocal relationality, with other members of the earth community and with God, in the circulation and mutual embeddedness of divine persons for one another within the Trinity.

### *Nature as an active subject*

The Bible is full of examples of nature personified. At the beginning of creation, God blesses all living creatures and instructs them to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:22).<sup>17</sup> God makes a covenant after the flood not only with Noah and his descendants but also with “every living creature” (Gen 9:9-17) and “the earth” (9:13). Other writers tell of the mountains and hills “breaking into song,” the trees of the field “clapping their hands” (Isa 55:12), and the stones that “would shout out” in witness to Jesus if his disciples were silent (Luke 19:40). Ravens serve God by feeding Elijah in the wilderness (1 Kgs 17:4-6), and a bush and worm appointed by God teach Jonah (Jonah 4:6-8). In one of his replies to Zophar, Job appeals to the capacity of other creatures to recognize God's movements:

But ask the animals, and they will teach you;  
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;  
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;  
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.  
Who among all these does not know  
that the hand of the LORD has done this?  
In his hand is the life of every living thing  
and the breath of every human being. (Job 12:7-10)

Jesus' forty days in the desert are spent “with the wild beasts” (Mark 1:12), and his death and resurrection are both marked by earthquakes (Matt 27:51; 28:2).

In addition to humanity, the rest of nature is also included as a recipient of God's care and redemption throughout the biblical narrative. The same Spirit of God that hovered over the waters at the beginning of creation (Gen 1:2) also “renews the face of the ground” (Ps 104:30). The salvation God envisions extends beyond rebuilding human institutions or relationships to the creation of “a new heaven and a new earth” in which even the enmity between non-human creatures is overcome (Isa 65:17-25; cf. Revelation 21:1). Paul speaks not only of the whole creation “groaning” and waiting “with eager longing” to be “set free from its bondage to decay” (Rom 8:18-25) but also of the risen Christ, through whom “God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1:19). Finally, the risen Jesus commissions his disciples saying, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15).

The biblical witness strengthens a holistic approach of earth stewardship by underscoring the earth and all creatures as co-worshippers, co-participants in God's intentions, and co-recipients of God's care and redemption. As biblical scholar David Rhoads puts it, “Creation is not a stage or a backdrop on which human redemption is carried out. We have screened creation out of much of our reading of the Bible, where the natural order is an integral part of that which God is seeking to redeem and bring to fulfillment.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> All scripture references are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>18</sup> David Rhoads, “Reflections on a Lutheran Theology of Creation: Foundations for a New Reformation,” *Seminary Ridge Review* 15, no. 1 (2012): 8.

### *Stewardship*

Stewardship is also a key biblical concept underlying creation care, and Douglas John Hall helps us recover a more expanded view of it, explicating several dimensions.<sup>19</sup> In what he calls the *theological dimension* of Christian stewardship, stewards are chosen and given responsibility not for their own sakes but on behalf of the whole, and God is the master or owner of that with which they have been entrusted: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Psalm 24:1). Yet stewardship must involve care for the earth, Hall maintains, not only as a necessary response to environmental degradation and scientific warnings, but also because the term “steward” characterizes who Jesus is and what he does. This is the *Christological dimension* of stewardship. Hall sees Jesus as the preeminent steward who defines and fulfills that role and enables those who are “in Christ” to participate in his stewardship. Our illusion of ownership and lack of accountability are overcome in Christ, who enables us by grace to share in God’s self-giving love for the life of the world.

More implications of stewardship flow from this central participatory insight. In the *ecclesiastical dimension*, Hall states, “The church is a stewarding community. As the body of Christ, the disciple community is being incorporated into the work of the great steward.”<sup>20</sup> Rather than an end in itself, the church that participates in Christ’s stewardship exists for a purpose greater than its own preservation and instead witnesses to the one who empties himself for the sake of others, and indeed for all creation, ultimately through kenosis and the cross. In the *anthropological dimension*, the stewardship of Jesus is a fundamentally human calling and signifies what God desires for all people, not just the church: “The human being is, as God’s steward, accountable to God and responsible for its fellow creatures.”<sup>21</sup> Finally, there is an *eschatological dimension* of stewardship:

The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards [*oikonomoi*] of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. (1 Pet 4:7-10)

The urgency here not only speaks to our current ecological crisis but also echoes other places in scripture where people are asked to give an account of their stewardship (e.g. Luke 12) and called to be stewards that are trustworthy (1 Cor 4:2).

How would the world be different if the church understood itself primarily as *steward*? For Hall, such an understanding could impact every area of ministry. “Stewardship does not describe any one dimension of the Christian life; it describes the whole posture called ‘Christian.’”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, stewardship is neither simply one aspect of mission nor a means to an end, even mission. Rather, Hall boldly asserts, “What I mean is that *stewardship is the church’s mission.*”<sup>23</sup> This expanded view of stewardship as mission and the participatory character of stewardship provide a helpful bridge between a familiar creation care concept and missional theology.

### *Perichoresis*

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<sup>19</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, Rev. ed. (New York: Friendship Press, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 244. Emphasis added.

This Trinitarian concept from the Eastern church emphasizes the primacy of a dynamic community of equal persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—finding unity within the Godhead through the mutual indwelling of each person existing in the other and emptying itself for the sake of the other in self-giving love. Examples of perichoretic language are found in the Gospel of John, where Jesus says, “the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (John 10:38; cf. 14:10-11; 17:21).

Western appreciation of this theological concept has impacted ecclesiology in recent decades. Miroslav Volf draws upon perichoresis to describe the church as the image of the Trinity through the Spirit, which enables people to share in the divine life of the Son who dwells in them (John 14:20; 17:23).<sup>24</sup> Craig Van Gelder illustrates how missional theologians combine the perichoretic social reality of God with an understanding of the *missio Dei* to describe “the church, through the redemptive work of Christ, as being created by the Spirit as a social community that is missionary by nature in being called and sent to participate in God’s mission in the world.”<sup>25</sup> The interior life of the Trinitarian persons in their self-giving love for *the other* also becomes the basis for the missional church that enters into reciprocal relationships with *members of its community*. Mirroring the Trinity, the relational emphasis in ministry is on equality rather than paternalism or hierarchy, recognizing others as uniquely gifted persons through whom God has the power to work, and viewing ministry as ministry not only *for* others but also *with* others as partners with God in God’s work in the world.<sup>26</sup>

Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile identify the need to connect the missional movement to the care of all creation, and, significantly, they point to perichoretic relationality as the starting place: “God makes space within God’s own Trinitarian life for creation, and creation participates relationally in that life.”<sup>27</sup> They clarify the need for the church’s reciprocal engagement with the world to be part of its participation in God’s ongoing activity and presence, engagement that identifies with the suffering neighbor (including the non-human neighbor) and leads to concrete acts of solidarity. “Mission is not the transmission of a particular set of properties, ideas, goods, or concepts to people, but rather the entering into relational webs that transform us even as we engage in shaping others.”<sup>28</sup> The concept of perichoresis that characterizes the Trinitarian divine life points, then, to the kind of missional, reciprocal relationships we have been created for—not only in relation to other human beings but also to other fellow creatures, which share the breath of life (Gen 2:7; 1:30; 7:15).

Viewing the world through perichoresis thus helps counter the anthropocentric myopia of the church’s ministry and provides basis for an integrated approach to earth stewardship; issues of social justice are rightly seen as inseparable from eco-justice concerns in the wider earth community. If we share with all creation perichoretic relationality, then its salvation is wrapped up in our own, and we who are in constant relationship with all creation must make room for its concerns in our words and actions.

These three biblical-theological concepts complement the theoretical ones above, underscoring that all ministry is embedded in God’s creation and carried out in webs of reciprocal relationality with other members of the earth community. They each provide a faithful basis for integrating earth stewardship into all areas of ministry.

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<sup>24</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*.

<sup>25</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 88.

<sup>26</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series; No. 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 375.

<sup>27</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, The Missional Network (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 112.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-22.

Congregations are ideal settings in which to practice the kind of earth stewardship needed for a more sustainable world. Practically, they can anticipate the ecological future into which we need to adapt globally through local action and collaboration. Theologically, they can envision themselves as co-recipients with all creation of God's redemption, co-participants in Christ's stewarding work, and even a "sign, foretaste, and instrument" of God's mission for the whole earth community.<sup>29</sup>

### **Integrating Congregations in Practice**

A recent study of creation care perceptions and practices among congregation leaders suggests that lasting change is most promising when congregations cultivate a view of earth stewardship not as one ministry among many but as infused into every aspect of ministry. The impetus for this study, my D.Min. project, emerged when the Living Water Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) passed a resolution at its 2014 assembly recognizing "creation care as integral to each faith practice, lived out in worship, service, study, and witness as a vital component of the church's identity and vocation today."<sup>30</sup> My research question asked: How do leaders perceive and practice creation care in daily life and in congregations, and what is the missional character of their perceptions and practices?

My explanatory sequential project involved conducting a survey followed by focus group interviews. A total of 136 clergy and lay leaders, representing eighty-four congregations in the Midwest, completed the survey which explored creation care perceptions and practices in the areas of worship, education, congregational life, building and grounds, and community action. One result of the survey was that congregational creation care practices are less pronounced than personal practices. Individuals were more likely than congregations to engage in intentional behaviors that reduced their ecological footprints, and interviews revealed that even in congregations without a creation care team, individuals could be quite active environmentally. The prevalence of these personal practices could embolden congregations to make them a part of corporate life.

Thirteen leaders from four congregations participated in follow-up focus group interviews. I conducted these separate interviews during the summer of 2015, using a focus group protocol. I recorded the interviews digitally and transcribed them myself with the help of my own notes and the notes of a lay assistant. From the transcriptions, I analyzed each interview through a process of coding according to Charmaz, which included producing *in vivo* codes through word-by-word coding, followed by focused codes and axial codes.<sup>31</sup> A final stage of analysis, theoretical coding, involved diagramming how the axial codes could be related.

I deliberately chose two congregations that had creation care teams and two that did not, and, while working with pastors to set up the interviews, I encouraged gender balance and an inclusion of various ages. While I preferred interviewees that participated in the survey, I allowed pastors to invite anyone from their congregations whose perspectives they thought would be beneficial. I wanted focus groups that would reflect a variety of geographical, demographical, and congregational perspectives, and I believe the focus group participants were reflective of the synod. The following table gives a profile of the focus group interviewees.

#### *Profile of Focus Group Participants*

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<sup>29</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995). See also Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit*, 19.

<sup>30</sup> All proper names have been changed to pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality.

<sup>31</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006).

Respondent	Gender	Age	Role(s)	Church Has Creation Care Team?
Mariposa Lutheran Church				Yes
MP1	male	50-59	senior pastor	
MP2	female	60-69	creation care team, organist	
MP3	female	70-79	creation care team, global mission team	
Columbine Lutheran Church				Yes
CP1	female	60-69	senior pastor	
CP2	female	60-69	associate pastor	
CP3	female	50-59	creation care team, council member	
Trillium Lutheran Church				No
TP1	female	30-39	pastor	
TP2	male	60-69	property committee, council member	
TP3	female	60-69	Sunday School, VBS leader	
TP4	male	18-29	VBS leader	
Lupine Lutheran Church				No
LP1	male	50-59	pastor	
LP2	male	70-79	retired pastor	
LP3	female	70-79	worship & music committee member	

Conducting focus group interviews with four congregations yielded rich insights into the complex yet rewarding process of incorporating creation care into local ministry. Figure 3 presents six overall themes to help summarize these insights, using a diagram to show their interrelatedness, as in the theoretical coding of the interviews: (1) *inspiration for earth stewardship*, (2) *systemic separation from the rest of creation*, (3) *personal connection with God in creation*, (4) *cultivation of creation care in congregational life*, (5) *missional relationships with community*, and (6) *graceful engagement*—shown in bold in the engagement of personal, congregational, and community circles of concern.

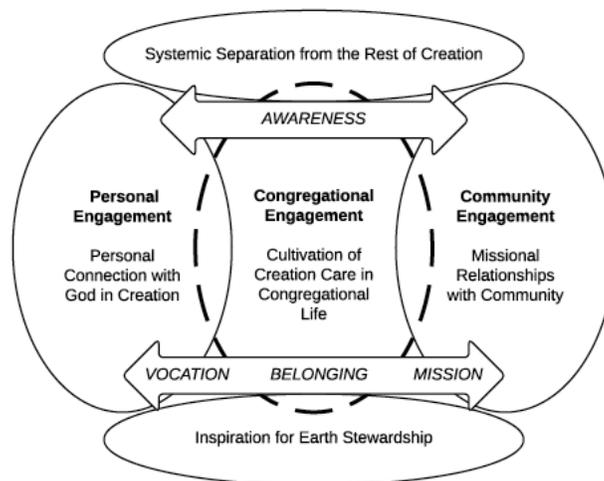


Figure 3. Overall Qualitative Themes Across Congregations

First, all focus groups expressed *inspiration for earth stewardship*. They mentioned the earth belonging to God, a human mandate to responsibility as the correct interpretation of “dominion” (MP1, LP1), and the importance of seeking harmony with other creatures. Interviewees from Trillium and Lupine, which did not have creation care teams, tended to phrase earth stewardship in terms of “wise use” of creation and its resources, maintaining a sense of human agency as primary. Participants from Mariposa and Columbine, with long-established creation care teams, tended to employ more reciprocal terminology such as “mutuality” with other creatures (CP1). They referred to God’s agency in renewing all creation and connecting humanity with the earth and used participatory language in phrases like “earth stewardship as Christ centered healing” and humanity’s role of being “co-creators with God.” Some mentioned inspiration for earth stewardship in Native American spirituality and the concept of the seventh generation (TP2, LP1). Lupine leaders made an explicit connection between caring for the poor and caring for the earth, and Columbine leaders stressed the need for spelling out concern for the earth as part of God’s mission.

Second, participants across congregations lamented humanity’s *systemic separation from the rest of creation*. They described a disconnect from the outdoors as the “dark side” of technology (MP2), and how human practices threaten water quality and show a lack of regard for creation. Most focus groups discerned how society gives a higher priority to economic motivations than to ecological needs and understood society’s assumed goal of economic growth as part of the systemic fabric of unsustainability. While all participants noted the importance of raising awareness and accepting responsibility, those from Mariposa and Columbine, which have creation care teams, used theological categories to describe this human rift from the rest of creation as “sinful” (MP3) and requiring “deep repentance” (CP1). Such liturgical terminology powerfully recognizes the deep spiritual rupture that accurately reflects of our society’s captivity to systems denigrating the earth and invites openness to a new direction.

Third, representatives from all focus groups conveyed a *personal connection with God in creation*. They described God’s “close presence” in wilderness settings and gardening, and they spoke of encounters with nature evoking thanks, wonder, ecstasy, and joy. Those with the support of creation care teams in their congregations also emphasized humanity’s connection to the rest of nature as part of it, not above it, and they expressed such mutuality regularly by worshipping *with* creation and perceiving the outdoors as an extension of sanctuary. This personal connection with God in creation was evident in the annual service of rogation at Mariposa and using the *Season of Creation* at Columbine.<sup>32</sup>

Fourth, in each congregation, participants recognized the importance of *cultivating creation care in congregational life*. Mariposa and Columbine have benefited from their creation care teams, which over time have been incorporating creation care into the everyday thinking of their members through earth bytes in bulletins, opportunities for learning and teaching, guest speakers, liturgical resources, giving members permission to follow through with ideas, and modeling real-life, long-term stewardship in many areas of congregational life. Trillium and Lupine leaders recognized their need to raise creation care consciousness through education and awareness in the congregation to address a current low priority on earthkeeping. The protocol helped these participants identify some earth-honoring congregational activities such as mentoring youth in the outdoors, recycling, and

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<sup>32</sup> Norman Habel, “The Season of Creation Story,” <http://seasonofcreation.com/about/the-season-of-creation-story/> (accessed October 4, 2015).

adopting a stretch of highway. In addition, the personal practices of members in these congregations would provide helpful assets for encouraging the implementation of corporate practices.

Fifth, representatives from each congregation saw ways in which creation care could be a beneficial avenue for *missional relationships with the community*. Those from Trillium and Lupine recognized ways members were currently involved in earthkeeping activities beyond church walls through lake associations, sportsmen's clubs, and other civil society organizations, and Trillium hosted community relief efforts during the aftermath of an area flood. All linked some of their actions to emphases in the wider church, through the ELCA, Lutheran World Relief, and ecumenical partnerships. While there was openness in each group to seek out new local partnerships for earth stewarding projects, the two congregations with creation care teams had already formed several overt ties to others in their local contexts through community gardens, harvest meals, speakers, and an environmental fair. In such hospitality and outreach, Mariposa and Columbine were engaging non-members, calling attention to local abundance and capacity, and increasing the visibility of the church as an instrument and demonstration of God's stewardship in the world. A few participants also used language related to God's mission and agency in earth stewardship. Lupine linked missional action to prayer and study, Mariposa defined stewardship as Christ-centered healing, and Columbine made an explicit connection between the mission of God and the earth.

Sixth, focus groups across congregations expressed in the topic of creation care the need for *graceful engagement* through the church's internal dynamics and public witness. They recognized potential divisions within the church, reflecting divisions in the society, which have presented obstacles to making adaptive changes, and they called for dialogue and substantive conversations to get beyond stereotypes and polarization. Lupine participants saw the potential of the church to be a creation care prophet that would promote an atmosphere of cooperation by being gently persuasive, though they were not actively following through with this insight, acknowledging that prophetic was outside their "comfort zone" (LP1). Trillium also saw its role as listening, though not taking a stand, in a charged political climate. But Mariposa participants saw being political and even "subversive" as part of stewardship, advocating a gentle yet "unstinting" approach (MP2). Those from Columbine also, despite power dynamics and risk, have boldly hosted a public annual environmental fair that has brought various groups in the community together, and they pointed to tools for communal discernment among multiple stakeholders. The support of a creation care team in these congregations has kept the challenge of isolation at bay.

The diagram—which I have found helpful in workshop settings—also shows two horizontal arrows that span personal, congregational, and community engagement: AWARENESS, especially of systemic separation from the rest of nature; and VOCATION, BELONGING, and MISSION emerging through the intersection of inspiration for earth stewardship with personal, congregational, and community circles, respectively. These themes were also evident in the focus group interviews. The permeable boundary suggests that both the guiding inspiration for earth stewardship can be discovered both inside and outside the church's walls and membership.

For the Mariposa and Columbine, incorporating creation care into the everyday life of the congregation involves creating space for hopeful action and inspiration, which together strengthen the personal VOCATION of individuals through faith practices and the collective VOCATION of the church as responsibility lived out in MISSIONAL relationships seeking the well-being of all creation. The community and wider church find BELONGING in their ministry through hospitality, and individuals connect personally with God and creation by contributing their ideas that are being supported; they also recognize their BELONGING within the web of God's creation. These relationships in generate AWARENESS within the church about our separation from the rest of nature through ecological education and AWARENESS in the community about the church's

concern for the earth through its visibility, advocacy, and modeling of real life, long-term earth stewardship.

For Trillium and Lupine, a component that seemed missing in their inspiration to use creation wisely was a deeper AWARENESS of humanity's estrangement from and damage to the earth that the previous two congregations exhibited, a self-critical posture of humility and repentance that results from raising creation care consciousness. Leaders saw the challenge of raising such consciousness in the congregation as BELONGING in or reflecting the wider political tensions of the community. The personal connection these interviewees have felt with God through nature could BELONG in an intentional cultivation of earthkeeping practices in congregational life, worship, and study, as could the conscious sharing of members' actions in the community. Such congregational practices could generate greater awareness both in the congregation and in the wider MISSIONAL context as part of the church's prophetic witness.

In sum, each congregation interviewed expressed ways in which creation care was a value for the church to embrace more deeply. Focus groups from congregations that had creation care teams for the past seven years tended to see themselves as participating in God's mission for the well-being of earth and its people, to view humanity in reciprocal relationships with the rest of nature, and to describe the depth of humanity's systemic separation from creation in terms of sin that leads to repentance. Those with the support of creation care teams were able to incorporate creation care into many aspects of congregational life, to bring tools for engaging this topic even in contexts with tension, and to build intentional earth stewarding partnerships with community organizations.

## Conclusion

Congregations are ideal settings for modeling the kind of creation care needed for a more sustainable world. Seeing earth stewardship as tangential to Christian identity and vocation reflects a diminished view of God's mission. But the Holy Spirit empowers congregations to understand themselves as participants with God in the care and redemption of all God has made, and to embody what Larry Rasmussen calls "anticipatory communities" that demonstrate ahead of time practices that are needed to live into the future of creation God intends:

What suffice are not good ideas, critical though they be, but good communities; in our case anticipatory communities meeting adaptive challenges. "Anticipatory communities" are home places where it is possible to reimagine worlds and reorder possibilities, places where new or renewed practices give focus to an ecological and postindustrial way of life.<sup>33</sup>

While perhaps no single congregation can demonstrate all aspects of the anticipatory way of life Rasmussen envisions, anticipatory practices of different congregations helped me form a collective and more hopeful picture of the synod.

Each of the four focus groups brought a positive contribution, and each saw its congregation's potential to grow more deeply and intentionally in its creation care activity. But the data from what I call the two integrating congregations revealed that a creation care team significantly increases a congregation's capacity to integrate creation care practices into worship, education, congregational life, building and grounds, and community action. Referring back to the initial themes above, they were growing in sustainability practices, pursuing local initiatives while cultivating a global consciousness, and collaborating with civil society organizations. They were deepening the expression of creation care in their corporate life, building and grounds, and community action meant going beyond recycling and changing out light bulbs to modeling real-life

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<sup>33</sup> Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 226-27.

long-term earth stewardship through community gardens, conducting harvest meals with local organic food, and hosting an environmental fair.

Integrating congregations lifted up God's concern for all creation regularly in worship, recognizing human systemic separation from the rest of nature in terms of sin, calling for actions of *metanoia*, and using liturgical resources like a service of rogation or the Season of Creation to emphasize human belonging as part of the earth community (not above it) and as an instrument of God's love for the whole creation. These actions reflect the theological theme of perichoresis, and the biblical themes of stewardship and of relating to nature as a co-participant in worship and co-recipient of God's redemption. Integrating congregations saw prayers, hymns, and preaching as vehicles for making explicit God's mission with the earth.

In the politically charged conversation that earthkeeping has become, congregations without creation care teams saw their role as listening but not taking a stand, citing possible internal disruption in the church and confessing that being publicly prophetic was not in their comfort zone. Their concerns were not unique; all focus groups discerned tensions and the risk of divisions in their contexts. Yet integrating congregations, supported by church networks, insights of civil society organizations, and their creation care team, were bringing up creation care in the community regularly and visibly. They were engaging the political process as part of stewardship, seeking graceful engagement, and building relationships with other churches and organizations in the community. Although some of these actions have resulted in the loss of members, they have also created more interest and missional activity in these congregations, especially with non-members who are becoming involved with some earth stewarding projects.

The foregoing research shows the leadership of integrating congregations. Congregations with creation care teams were able to deepen and broaden personal participation with creation care through congregational engagement and community engagement, even when there were risks. Through cultivating awareness, belonging, and vocation, these congregations built new relationships and grew in understanding their local earth stewardship as a component of participating in God's mission. While leadership for earthkeeping can emerge from a variety of individuals in integrating congregations, pastoral support was essential to affirming initiatives and helping to frame creation care as integral to each component of ministry.

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