

# Every Creature Singing

Embracing the Good News for Planet Earth

## Participant Guide:

### Unit 2: Pursuing Peace and Justice

[Read introduction](#) to the curriculum

[Session 5](#) Environmental Disasters, Ancient and Modern

[Session 6](#) Slow Violence and the Gospel of Peace

[Session 7](#) Hearing from the Global Community

[Session 8](#) Claiming Our Citizenship



## Session 5: Slow Violence and the Gospel of Peace

### *Knowing Your Faith*

Jump to: [Discussion Questions](#)

[Knowing Your Place](#)

[Practices](#)

[Resources](#)

**Scripture:** Luke 19:41-44

**Suggested Eco-Lens Questions:** Try E and F.

**“As [Jesus] came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.’” *Luke 19:41-42***

When the earliest Anabaptists wrote about violence, they spoke as victims, braving fire and sword for the sake of their understanding of the Gospel. When mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Mennonites wrote about military service, they spoke mostly as bystanders, determined to avoid contributing to the carnage of warfare. Today, being a people of peace is trickier. It is easier to identify with Jesus’ confused contemporaries who “did not recognize the things that make for peace.” It requires the painful recognition that we may be among the perpetrators of violence.

Mennonites have a long history as a peace church, but we are only beginning to connect the dots between our commitment to peacemaking and our call to kinship with the earth. In this century, one of the most critical forms of violence we face is violence against creation. This kind of violence affects human beings as well, particularly the poor and the powerless. Learning to recognize “the things that make for peace” in an era of coal ash ponds, spent uranium and palm plantations requires a new set of eyes. Consider these questions:

**What are the “things that make for peace,” and what do they have to do with creation?**

Readers often point to Jesus’ inaugural address at Nazareth in Luke 4:18-19 in order to understand his ministry. We could also ask, “What made him weep?” In Luke 19:41-44, we see Jesus weeping over Jerusalem because the city “did not recognize the things that make for peace.” Jesus doesn’t spell out what things Jerusalem failed to recognize, but judging from his ministry, we can infer they included healing and teaching, sharing of resources and economic justice.

We can also assume that Jesus was working out of a Jewish *shalom* framework when he spoke of peace. *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace—a word with a very broad connotation. Perry Yoder’s book, *Shalom: The Bible’s Word for Salvation, Justice and Peace*, is helpful in unpacking this term. Yoder identifies three meanings of the word, *shalom*, all

of which must be present for shalom to exist:

- Material wellbeing and prosperity
- Justice
- Honesty, integrity and straightforwardness

Yoder's book puts a particular emphasis on justice. Using a number of Psalms, he demonstrates that justice is a basic characteristic of God, and that God's justice is based on providing for those in need rather than meting out reward or punishment on the basis of merit.<sup>1</sup>

If peace cannot exist without justice or material wellbeing, it is easy to see how our control over creation plays into the picture. The rich can outbid the poor for the services that nature provides. With their dollars, they can see that land grows coffee for North Americans, not vegetables for local consumption. The rich can afford to send their wastes elsewhere, or can move away from them; the poor cannot. Since the field of environmental justice first developed in the 1980s, it is clear that environmental hazards are often located in low income or minority neighborhoods. The first nationally recognized environmental protest by a minority group involved a toxic waste dump in an African-American community in Warren County, North Carolina, in 1982.<sup>2</sup> More recent examples of environmental injustice include:

- Oil spills in the Niger Delta that devastate biodiversity and the local fishing industry.<sup>3</sup>
- Higher incidence of birth defects in coal mining communities in Appalachia.<sup>4</sup>
- A huge trash incinerator, slated for Baltimore's Curtis Bay area, a minority neighborhood that already has the most toxic air in Maryland.<sup>5</sup>

In each of these cases, creation suffers and the poor bear the brunt of environmental damage along with it. Deceit and lies are also a refrain in articles on these topics.<sup>6</sup> The things that make for peace—material wellbeing, justice and integrity—are not present.

If our oil harms fishing communities in the Niger Delta, our lights stay on at the expense of children in West Virginia and our trash gives teenagers asthma, we are not living in peace. If our lifestyles require more land, food and resources than one planet can provide, we are not at peace either.

### **How can we recognize and oppose “slow violence”?**

A missile drops on a town and levels the shopping district. Body parts mingle with building debris and flames rip through what is left of the community. In 45 minutes, the town is a charred wasteland. Someone films the carnage and it makes the nightly news.

All of us would agree that this is violence, and nearly all of us would condemn it as against the will of God. But what if the time frame for destruction moves more slowly? What if this same town, over a fifty-year period, experiences the effects of radiation, air pollution or groundwater depletion? People get ill, die, go hungry, or move away, and a thriving community disintegrates. Is this violence also? The effect may be just as devastating, only slower. A child born without legs due to toxins accumulated year by year in the groundwater walks no better than children who lost their legs due to landmines.

In his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon examines the challenges of “seeing” violence that takes place slowly. He looks at examples from the Global South where deforestation, mega dams, oil companies, radiation and other environmental threats ruin lives and livelihoods. He also looks at the strategies local activists have employed to make these forms of violence visible. If we are a peace people who oppose violence, how do we too distinguish the effects of “slow violence” and make them visible?

### **What constitutes violence against nonhuman creation?**

Can animals be victims of violence? What about non-living creation, such as a landscape? Although most of us think of human-to-human activity when we use the word, *violence*, phrases such as, “rape of the land,” suggest that we do recognize violence against nature.

All of the actions below would be murder if they were performed against human beings. Environmental ethicists debate what other life forms count morally,<sup>7</sup> but few laypeople have begun to weigh cases like the ones below. Which are acceptable losses and which are not? Consider:

- European settlers slaughter buffalo by the hundreds and leave them to rot, killing them only for sport or because Native Americans depend on them.
- A hunter shoots a deer during hunting season and enjoys a freezer full of meat.
- A logging company clear-cuts a forest; then moves on to another area.
- A mining company removes metals from a mountain, minimizing environmental damage and maintaining a close relationship with nearby communities.
- A land manager burns an oak savanna to preserve a rare habitat that cannot thrive without fire. Some snakes and turtles lose their lives in the flames.
- Coral reefs are dying as the ocean becomes more acidic due to climate change.
- Chickens are slaughtered for meat within six weeks of hatching without ever setting foot outdoors.

As our population and our technological power continue to grow, it is important that all of us grapple with the line between providing for human need and violence against creation. This guideline may serve as a starting point: We cross the line into violence when we damage a system in a way that makes it difficult for regeneration to occur.<sup>8</sup>

### **How can our peacemaking care for creation? How can caring for creation make peace?**

Waging war is the most environmentally destructive activity that humans engage in. In addition to battlefield issues such as landmines and spent uranium, militaries are heavy consumers of fossil fuels<sup>9</sup> and frequent creators of superfund sites.<sup>10</sup> Rich Meyer, Goshen, Indiana, a longtime volunteer with Christian Peacemaker Teams makes this observation:

One could say that any peacemaking effort that decreases the activity of armed forces anywhere has a creation care benefit. This is true whether it was done by cutting military budgets, by de-escalating a conflict so that armed forces stayed in their barracks, or by cancelling some missions through mediation. I would guess that some years, the Eastern Mennonite University Center for Justice and Peacebuilding has saved more fossil fuel through mediation than all the Mennonite agencies use in a year for airline travel.<sup>11</sup>

Even if peacemakers never say a word about creation care, they are still making a contribution to the health of the planet. Greater benefits might come forth if we did speak, think and write more about the linkages between peacemaking and creation.

Meanwhile, building peace through working together on environmental projects is an emerging field in the secular world.<sup>12</sup> This could be an exciting area for some of us to explore. Maybe shared environmental concerns can strengthen relationships at the congregational level as well. It would be a wonderful thing if people of different political persuasions or ethical positions found unity working shoulder to shoulder in a community garden or a river cleanup.

### **What does peace with creation look like in daily living?**

In his book *Fingerprints of Fire, Footprints of Peace*, Noel Moules suggests that “a major mark of a truly spiritual person is that they live in harmony with wild nature.”<sup>13</sup> He mentions Jesus being with the wild animals during the temptation and cites the example of various desert mothers and fathers. Moules’ suggestion tracks well with the findings of current environmental research. In his 1984 book, *Biophilia*, renowned scientist E. O. Wilson argued that humans have an instinctive urge to affiliate with other forms of life. More recently, Richard Louv has shown that direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy child development.<sup>14</sup> Humans were designed to live their lives deeply entwined with nature. Thus it makes sense that the *shalom* that permeates spiritually mature people would include peace with the natural world.

What does a *shalom* relationship with the natural world look like? Based on what we know about healthy human relationships, we can assume it would include delight, intimacy and attachment. Once I attended a gathering where the presenter showed us a picture of a Palestinian woman hugging an olive tree in a war-torn landscape. “Is there any place you love enough to die for?” he asked us. It’s an interesting question to contemplate even if the answer is no. Certainly we are poorer people if we move only between cubicle and strip mall and there are no natural places in our lives that we love. Peace with creation includes feeling safe and at home in the natural world. It includes having outdoor “friends” that we recognize: favorite trees, species of birds, special places. Sensitivity to small changes in an ecosystem might be another characteristic of *shalom* with nature. We notice when our friends look ill or cut their hair; spotting the first signs of a drought or the first spring birdsongs are also signs of intimacy.

Secondly, peace with creation requires an acceptance of nature’s ways and a willingness to fit in with them rather than to dominate them for our own ends. At the first sign of a

garden insect, many people scamper to the store for powerful pest killers. It is alarming to read the warlike language marketers apply to farm and garden products. Consider these sentences from pest control advertisements (*italics mine*):

- “Herbicides are a key *weapon* in the lawn weed control *arsenal*.”
- “Whether there is a weed *invasion* in your lawn or a weed's failure to disappear in the driveway, Ortho Weed Killers lay down the law. *Take matters into your own hands...*”
- “As the *war* against insects heats up this season, it's important to have *Warrior* with Zeon Technology® on your side...”

We might laugh off this melodrama as simply a sales pitch, but the language of violence shapes our relationship with nature more than we want to admit. Another perspective in the case of garden insects is to look and see if the plant is actually damaged. From an ecological perspective, a nibbled plant is doing its job as part of the food chain. A gardener who thinks of himself as a gentle doctor diagnosing a patient might try hand-picking insects or non-toxic home remedies before embracing the tactics of an armed vigilante.

### How does the reconciling work of Jesus Christ relate to creation?

In recent decades, Mennonite scholars have thought deeply about how a peace theology shapes the way we understand the atonement. More work is needed relating the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to creation. What does it mean to take seriously texts such as Colossians 1:15-20 and Romans 8:18-25 that understand Jesus' reconciling work to include all of creation, not just humans? Hopefully many able minds will embrace these questions.

Meanwhile, it is interesting to observe how naturally the New Testament language that describes Jesus' saving work can apply to the earth:

- **Reconcile:** Many of us have relationships with nature that are distant, violent or unjust. This broken relationship affects even children. Richard Louv, mentioned above, argues that nature deficit disorder is linked to obesity, Attention Deficit Disorder and depression.<sup>15</sup> We need reconciliation with the natural world.
- **Save:** The biblical word for salvation was a literal one that meant to rescue from danger. It is also sometimes translated as *preserve, heal, cure* or *make well*. Today, one *saves* whales, rainforests, topsoil and a variety of endangered species. It is not a huge leap to see that when we do these things, we are following the work and way of Jesus.
- **Redeem or ransom:** These words apply equally well to people or land. To redeem was to buy back from slavery or hostile forces. To redeem a property was to buy back land that was sold outside of the family. When I think of redemption of land, I remember the story of Art and Jocele Meyer, some of the first Mennonites to teach about creation care back in the 1980s. The Meyers bought 80 acres of land in Ohio, some of which had been strip-mined. A lake full of acid runoff came with the deal, and “gray piles of subsoil resembling moonscapes” dotted the mined acres. The Meyers paid the price in money and time to redeem ruined land. With the help of family and friends, they planted 12,000 trees to help the land recover. The cost to properly reclaim some parts of the strip-mined land was as much as \$14,000 per acre.<sup>16</sup>

I do not mean to deny the more spiritual meanings that many Christians associate with words like reconciliation, salvation or redemption. But we are better equipped both spiritually and practically, if we understand just how down to earth the language of salvation actually is.

### **Concluding thoughts**

When I read about the vast web of environmental injustice that ensnares all of us, I want to crawl under my petroleum based, VOC-laden, non-recyclable rug. If we truly understand what the Bible means by peace, it is patently clear that our world falls far short of it and that we participate in our society's sins. We can no longer take our place with the Pharisee praying in the temple, extolling our virtuous history and our lack of handguns. We have to slink into the back row with the tax collector and cry, "God, have mercy on me a sinner!" (Luke 18:9-14).

This is not necessarily a bad thing. One common translation of the first beatitude in Matthew 5:8 is, "How blessed are those who know their need of God, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." If the environmental crisis gives us a stronger doctrine of sin, a more poignant understanding of our need for salvation and a better grasp of God's love, that would be good news indeed.

## Discussion Questions

### Key ideas

1. Where do you place yourself when you think of violence against creation? Do you see yourself as a victim, a bystander or guilty?
2. Do you think that “slow violence” is a good way to describe environmental damage that affects other people? Why or why not?
3. Revisit this question from the MCUSA resolution: *How is caring for creation part of the holistic good news of Jesus Christ?* What light does this session on peacemaking shed on that question?
4. Where do you place the line between providing for human need and violence against creation? Discuss the bulleted examples on page 5 – 3 or draw on local examples.
5. Peace with creation in daily living: How would you describe your relationship with creation? Are you at peace? Where is there conflict?

### Supplementary Questions

6. What makes you weep for peace? What do you suppose Jesus was looking at as he rode down the Mount of Olives on a donkey? The Leader’s Guide contains commentary on this.
7. How might your congregation’s commitment to peace guide you as you respond to the environmental crisis? Can you build on peace work you are already doing? Or might creation care projects lead you to peacemaking? Could a weather stripping fest heal simmering rifts in your congregation? What about an interracial community garden in your community?

## Knowing Your Place

### Place Questions

1. What forms of environmental damage are you aware of in your map area?
2. What do you know about income distribution within your region? What social classes live where?
3. Is racial segregation a part of your map area? Where do minorities live? Can you see any relationships between low income or minority communities and potential environmental hazards such as landfills and factories?



## Practices

### Spiritual Practices

1. **Read and reflect** on the poem, "[Ordinance Plant](#)," by Joseph Gascho. Are there actions with environmental consequences in your own history? Pray or journal about these situations. Pray that any toxins in your present community will be revealed and dealt with.
2. **Praying with waste:** If you have a town dump, super-fund site or other hazard within your area, visit that site. Walk, observe and pray there.
3. **Spend time with a weeping Jesus:** In a journal or prayer, name the things that make you weep over your city or country today. What "things that make for peace" go unrecognized?

### Household Practices

1. **Locate your county's household hazardous waste disposal.** Learn what items they take and post the schedule for receiving items. Check your house and garage for CFL light bulbs, batteries, oils, paints, pesticides and old medicines. Set up a safe storage area for items on the way to the hazardous waste facility.
2. **Make a list** of all the products in your household that contain toxic chemicals. Can you switch to natural agents or use less of these? Think about when you really need a powerful cleanser or pesticide and when you use it out of habit. If you want to know what is in the products you use and what studies have been done on these chemicals, see the [Household Products Database](#).

## *Additional Resources*

**Article 22, [Peace, Justice and Nonresistance](#), Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, 1995.**

The Mennonite Church's confession of faith states that, "The biblical concept of peace embraces personal peace with God, peace in human relations, peace among nations, and peace with God's creation."

**Heinrichs, Steve, ed. *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice and Life Together*. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2013.**

This unsettling collection of essays includes Native American voices and grapples with white appropriation of Native lands.

**Moules, Noel. *Fingerprints of Fire, Footprints of Peace*. Winchester, UK: Circle Books, 2012.**

See especially chapter 4, Shalom Activist and chapter 6, Creation Companion.

**Yoder, Perry. *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice and Peace*. Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1987.**

A brief guide to the Bible's understanding of peace, with a strong emphasis on justice.

**Stassen, Glen H. and David P. Gushee. *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*. Downer's Grover, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003.**

See chapter 6, The Transforming Initiatives of the Sermon on the Mount, pp. 125-145. The authors are not writing about creation care here, but their approach to the Sermon on the Mount is a thought-provoking contribution to peacemaking.

## **Stories of Environmental Justice Work**

[EcoPeace Middle East](#) An organization that brings together Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli environmentalists to promote cooperative efforts to protect their shared environmental heritage.

**[Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Study Guide](#)  
[Environmental Justice with Indigenous Peoples](#)**

For more than five centuries, the Doctrine of Discovery and the laws based upon it have legalized the theft of land, labor and resources from Indigenous Peoples across the world. The study guides above include stories of reparative justice and tools to pursue healing.

**Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project** This urban nonprofit located in Oakland, Ca., addresses the opportunities and challenges that face working class communities of color. Movement Generation develops practical strategies to address the increasing economic and social impacts of global environmental problems on urban low-income communities and communities of color.

Smith, Emilie Theresa. **"The Thorn Tree Resistance."** *Sojourners Magazine*, March 2014. This article is an example of environmental injustice involving mining in Guatemala. It describes the local people's faith-based response. §

## End Notes for Essay

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<sup>1</sup> Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1987) 37-38.

<sup>2</sup> Renee Skelton and Vernice Miller, [The Environmental Justice Movement](#), Natural Resources Defense Council.

<sup>3</sup> [Oil Spill Coats River. Sea in Impoverished Niger Delta](#), Al Jazeera, December 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Allen Johnson, [And the Mountains Will Fall](#), *Sojourners Magazine*, April 2014.

<sup>5</sup> [Fighting a Dirty Trash Burning Plant in Curtis Bay](#), Chesapeake Climate Action Network.

<sup>6</sup> The oil spill article in footnote 3 is a case in point.

<sup>7</sup> For a helpful summary of the spectrum of positions such as animal rights, land ethics and deep ecology, see Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2010) 120-129.

<sup>8</sup> This comment from Luke Gascho is the flip side of Aldo Leopold's land ethic. Leopold states that, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." See Leopold's classic, *A Sand County Almanac*.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Hoy, ["The World's Biggest Fossil Fuel Consumer."](#) *Forbes*, June 5, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Clay Risen, ["The Environmental Consequences of War."](#) *Washington Monthly*, January/February 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Mennonite Creation Care Network archives.

<sup>12</sup> For example, see Ken Conca and Geoffrey D. Dabelko, *Environmental Peacemaking*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Noel Moules, *Fingerprints of Fire, Footprints of Peace* (Winchester, UK: Circle Books, 2012). See chapter 6, pp. 79 and following.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Louv, [Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder](#). Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin of Chapel Hill, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Louv, [Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder](#).

<sup>16</sup> Read their story in Art and Jocele Meyer, *Earthkeepers: Environmental Perspectives on Hunger, Poverty and Injustice*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991) 88-95.

## Ordnance plant

Two miles east  
the road came to a T.  
Straight ahead  
there was a chain-link fence  
ten-foot high, barbed wire at the top.

It kept us from the ordnance plant,  
a place they built  
the bombs  
they dropped  
in World War II.

My parents never knew  
about the other things that killed:  
the chemicals  
left over from the making of the bombs  
that leached down to the aquifer,  
the one from which the farmers pulled  
the water for their corn  
they used to feed the cows  
that gave the milk  
their babies drank.

In war our boys at church  
chose another path  
than neighbor youth.  
Peace and love  
was to rule our lives.  
And yet ten miles away that plant  
spewed out weapons every day  
and wheat we grew  
and cream we sold  
went to feed the makers of those bombs,  
a topic that the preacher  
never talked about.  
Nor of the raping of the land.

Instead they preached  
about the sins  
of wearing wedding bands  
and women shearing off their hair.

By Joseph Gascho  
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## Session 6: Environmental Disasters, Ancient and Modern

### *Knowing Your Faith*

*Jump to [Discussion Questions](#)*

*[Knowing Your Place](#)*

*[Practices](#)*

*[Resources](#)*

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 18:11-17

**Related Texts:** Jeremiah 4:23-28, 9:10

**Suggested Eco-Lens Questions:** Try B and F with Jeremiah 18:11-17.

While this curriculum directs readers' attention to their local communities, we cannot avoid the international elephant in the room: **climate change**. Since 1896, scientists have been aware that carbon dioxide and other gasses in the atmosphere function like glass in a greenhouse, warming the planet. More recently, they calculated that if atmospheric levels of this heat-trapping gas exceed 350 parts per million (ppm), the global climate will no longer function in the stable way it has for the past 10,000 years. Presently, measurements of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> keep ticking upward at the rate of about 2 ppm per year. On May 9, 2013, the official reading from the Mauna Loa Research Center in Hawaii hit 400 ppm for the first time in recorded history. According to analysis of air bubbles trapped in ice cores, this CO<sub>2</sub> reading is about 100 ppm higher than it has been for over 650,000 years.<sup>1</sup>

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is an international body that synthesizes climate research and issues reports for policymakers. According to the IPCC report published in September 2013, scientists are clear that the planet is warming. They are also 95% certain that the temperature rise is induced by human behaviors, especially the burning of fossil fuels. The IPCC's 2000-page report synthesized the findings of over 10,000 scientific studies and went through three detailed reviews. It reflects the consensus of 259 authors from 39 countries. Due to the number of people who have to agree, climate scientists tend to view IPCC findings as trustworthy but conservative.<sup>2</sup>

Climate change is real; human behavior is causing it, and it will bring unprecedented changes to our planet and future humans, animals and plants. The scope of the problem extends from the composition of the atmosphere to the acidity of the ocean; from melting permafrost in the Arctic to rising sea levels in the tropics; from the strength of typhoons in the Philippines to the length of droughts in Africa. We can't be certain that a single event was caused by climate change, but clear patterns are emerging. As the title of Bill McKibben's book, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*, indicates, we are in the process of losing the world as we know it. Anyone pursuing peace and justice in the realm of creation care needs to acknowledge these uncomfortable facts.

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<sup>1</sup> [NASA. Climate Change: How Do We Know?](#)

<sup>2</sup> [LiveScience: Four Things to Know About the IPCC's Climate Change Report](#)

## Rediscovering environmental loss within our faith tradition

In one sense, we are in a predicament humans have never faced before. On the other hand, many previous civilizations have been devastated by environmental disasters. They too lost the world as they knew it. While more square miles are at stake for us today, and more living things will be affected, *individuals and communities* will experience climate change in ways that have much in common with struggles people faced throughout history. For example, Ancient Near Eastern peoples were familiar with drought, erosion, deforestation, overgrazing, wildlife depletion and pollution.<sup>3</sup> How much of the planet can one person lose? You can lose your own land, your own community, your own hope, your own life: that's about it. I say this not to minimize the unprecedented scope of our environmental problems, but to suggest that history may hold wisdom for us, despite our outsized dilemmas.

One thing we might do while we are staring glumly into the future is to see if any of those stricken civilizations from the past left us advice. As a matter of fact, at least one of them packed us a time capsule. It's called the Hebrew Bible. Parts the Old Testament were written down over a six hundred-year period, but they did not cohere into a whole until the Babylonian exile following 587 BCE. This was the year Jerusalem was reduced to rubble by the empire of the day, and survivors became refugees in their enemy's country. It is clear from biblical texts that the Israelites saw the ruin and loss of **their land** as a big part of the tragedy. Hence, it could be argued that the driving editorial force shaping the Old Testament was an environmental disaster. This is the "where are we now?" (*ecological lens question A*) that the scribes were living as they sat sifting through the pieces that are now Deuteronomy and other biblical books of history. Sitting quietly on our shelves, waiting to be rediscovered, is an anthology that struggles to understand God, politics and faith in light of a desolate landscape.

The book of Jeremiah is perhaps the best case in point. Jeremiah is sometimes known as "the weeping prophet." His career as a priest, political adviser and spokesperson for God spanned several turbulent decades surrounding the pivotal year 587 BCE, when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. Jeremiah had the unenviable task of warning his nation of the coming disaster and watching it unfold. At best, his words fell on deaf ears. At other times, he nearly lost his life. Although he was powerless to stop the Babylonian invasion, Jeremiah remained committed to his people, offering words of hope and restoration when all seemed lost.

The book of Jeremiah is difficult to read. It offers us 52 chapters of judgment, anguish and hope tumbled together in a chronology that confuses biblical scholars but probably makes sense to weary activists. People who are going through a long, difficult experience that keeps looping back on itself can probably relate to the repetition and seeming disorder. In Jeremiah, we at least have a companion in catastrophe, if not a set of instructions. His poetry resonates with anyone who has lost a landscape they loved:

Take up weeping and wailing for the mountains,  
and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness,  
because they are laid waste so that no one passes through,  
and the lowing of cattle is not heard;

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<sup>3</sup> J. Donald Hughes covers these and other problems in his book, *Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1994.

both the birds of the air and the animals have fled and are gone.  
- Jeremiah 9:10

This kind of mourning over the devastation of the land is a refrain throughout the book.<sup>4</sup>

We cannot woodenly apply words intended for Jerusalem 2600 years ago to today. All the same, interesting things might happen if we allowed the prophet Jeremiah into our conversations about climate change, placing his words side by side with those of the IPCC. Something like that happened to Stephen Blackmer, a blogger at Kairos Earth who encountered a sculpture of the prophet Jeremiah when he was a student. Fascinated, he bought a poster of the artwork and kept it for the next 35 years, without knowing who Jeremiah was. "In all that time, Jeremiah remained as silent as the stone he was carved from,"<sup>5</sup> Blackmer says. Years later, while exploring how his newfound Christian faith might relate to climate change, Blackmer suddenly began to hear Jeremiah speak. Might he also speak to us? Let's see what new chords Jeremiah introduces into the conversation.

### **Jeremiah's God is a God of judgment.**

It would be difficult to find more emotionally offensive words than those attributed to God in Jeremiah 18:13-16. The people's ways are *evil*. They have done a *horrible* thing. Therefore, their land is a *horror*, and passersby are *horrified*. Can this language still speak to us today, or is such a harsh and punitive God an ancient relic we are all glad to have gotten beyond?

I would argue that the God of judgment portrayed here is not so much punitive as passionate. This God invests deeply in our planet. The people matter; the *land* matters, and therefore divine emotion runs the gamut from lament to outrage. "They have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness...The whole land is made desolate, but no one lays it to heart," God mourns in 12:10-11. I find these enraged outbursts more appealing than the idea of a bland, neutral being with the emotional range of a Hallmark card. This grieving persona is also a far cry from the vindictive God of many contemporary end time scenarios who is indifferent to the destruction of the earth and eager to crumple it up and move on.

Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim says that in the Hebrew understanding of judgment, God has designed the world so that deeds have consequences. Judgment grows out of the deed itself rather than being an unrelated punishment. Fretheim takes issue with the way the Hebrew word, *paqad*, is rendered as *punish* in verses such as Jeremiah 21:14. He says a more literal and accurate translation would be, "I will visit upon you the fruit of your doings."<sup>6</sup> Logical consequences ensue, with destruction often brought about by nature or foreign armies. Still, God is understood to be active in the process.

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<sup>4</sup> See also 2:7, 4:23-28, 5:23-25, 9:10-11, 12:10-11, 14:1-6.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Blackmer, "[Jeremiah Lives!](#)" Kairos Earth, December 4, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Terence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005) 163-165.



Judgment is also communal rather than individual. The whole community suffers when wrong is done, including innocent people and the land. It is the imprecise nature of judgment that makes it such an outrage to those trying to prevent it, as we can see from the earful Jeremiah gives God in chapter 12. The Hebrew understanding of judgment aligns well with the ways we are experiencing the effects of fossil fuel overconsumption. “The fruits of our doings” are indeed being visited upon us, but unfortunately, not with drone-like precision. We would not, for example, want to say that New York and New Orleans were hit with devastating storms because especially bad people lived there.

**Jeremiah saw his people’s crisis as a spiritual problem.**

According to the weeping prophet, the doom bearing down on his people was not to be blamed on the wickedness of the Babylonians or the geography of the Middle East. It was a spiritual problem with two roots: idolatry and injustice to the poor. What did his people do wrong? Jeremiah 22:8-9 depicts passersby gossiping about the destruction of Jerusalem:

“Why has the LORD dealt in this way with that great city?” one says.

“Because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD their God, and worshiped other gods and served them,” is the reply.

The charge of idolatry also appears in Jeremiah 18. The chapter builds to a climax in verses 14 and 15, as the author compares God’s anguish to that of a jilted lover:

Does the snow of Lebanon leave the crags of Syron?

Do the mountain waters run dry, the cold flowing streams?

But my people have forgotten me!

They burn offerings to a delusion . . .

A parallel concern runs alongside the accusations of idolatry:

They do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper,  
and they do not defend the rights of the needy. (Jeremiah 5:28)

Jeremiah 2:34 and 22:16 also express concern for the poor. In 34:8-22, the charge against the kingdom of Judah is the failure to free slaves on schedule, and chapter 19 describes child sacrifice.<sup>7</sup>

Is there any sense in which climate change is a spiritual problem? Neither energy nor industries nor vehicles are evil in and of themselves, but we sometimes use them to serve false centers of value, and sacrifice our children to keep them supplied with oil. I find the imagery in Jeremiah 18:14-15 contemporary and compelling for several reasons. When Jeremiah asks his questions about snow and mountain waters disappearing, (verse 14) the implied answers are, “Of course not! How ridiculous!” But for us, there is a double irony because now we need to answer, “Yes. Those are signs of climate change.” When I picture “burning offerings to a

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<sup>7</sup> While the link between worshipping false gods and these kinds of human abuses may not seem obvious to us, Ched Myers, an activist biblical scholar at Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries, suggests that in ancient Israel, the two went hand in hand. According to Myers, Canaanite cults were a form of civil religion that secured political loyalty and facilitated collection of taxes. They were “the ideological mechanism by which the peasantry was bled dry by the ruling class through the sacrificial apparatus.” From personal correspondence with Ched Myers.



delusion,” (verse 15) I see the fumes of our power plants and factories mingling with the smoke of ancient sacrifices. When we place the wrong things at the center of our lives, we are worshipping other gods.

### **Jeremiah demands repentance.**

“Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings,” Jeremiah says in 18:11. Theologian Susan Thistlethwaite said a similar thing in a *Washington Post* article<sup>8</sup> published in the wake of Super Typhoon Haiyan. The disaster killed over 6,000 people and destroyed or damaged about 16 million homes in the Philippines. She called climate change denial a moral evil and urged a theological prescription for what we must do: confess, repent, change. Internet comments were mostly hostile. People nitpicked her science and treated her like a religious nut.

Is climate change denial a sin? If human induced climate change contributes to deadly typhoons, then we have to admit something is wrong when it is easier to find a car with a heated seat than one with good gas mileage. We must also recognize the multiple forms of climate change denial. Some of us are deniers by ideology; others are deniers by apathy or greed or despair. It’s not as if gas stations have special pumps for climate change believers labeled “Emissions free gas.” Many of us who are convinced by the science nevertheless take an “Oh well...can’t do much about it” attitude. “What’s the point of turning down the thermostat if there is a new coal-fired power plant opening in China every week?” we ask. Why not apply the same optimism we use when we make a donation to other social problems? Usually we assume our small efforts will do a little bit of good.<sup>9</sup>

Whether we like him or not, Jeremiah offers us a model of fidelity to the truth and courage in proclaiming it. He pushes us to ask questions about sin and judgment that are not common in our culture. He confronts us with a God who is *not* an “Oh well” kind of a God. While Jeremiah’s message was unpleasant, he was not without hope. During the siege against Jerusalem, this stalwart prophet bought a field in the middle of a war zone. “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land,” he announced (32:1-15). He worshiped a God who permits painful consequences but also brings life out of death.

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<sup>8</sup> Thistlethwaite, Susan Brooks, [“Super” Typhoon Haiyan: Suffering and the Sin of Climate Change Denial](#), November 13, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Dowd makes this point in a blog entitled, [Matter Matters: Christians and Climate Change](#).

## Discussion Questions

### Practical

1. From what sources have you gathered your information and attitudes about climate change? Why have you chosen these sources?
2. What factors influence your decision about whether or not you should be concerned about climate change? What is at stake for you in these debates?
3. How do you talk with friends and neighbors whose views on climate change are different from your own? What arguments carry weight with them?
4. The authors of *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living* believe that "Climate change is not one big, intractable problem but billions of tiny, tractable ones."<sup>10</sup> Do you find this statement convincing? Name some of these small, solvable problems in your community.
5. Energy poverty is an issue as well as overconsumption of energy. Over a billion people do not have access to electricity. This puts limits on education and health care. Respiratory illnesses from cooking over open fires are a major health concern in the developing world. How do we bring a minimum level of comfort to all people?

### Biblical/Theological

6. Do you think it is appropriate to look for parallels between an Old Testament book like Jeremiah and a contemporary issue like climate change? Why or why not? What does Jeremiah add to the discussion of climate change?
7. The essay says that biblical people understood judgment to involve logical consequences, but saw God as engaged in the process of bringing them about. Do you believe God is at work in the process of climate change, or in other sorts of environmental consequences?
8. How do you react to Susan Thistlethwaite's assertion that climate change denial is a sin that requires confession, repentance and change? Other preachers prefer to use the language of sickness and healing to talk about climate change.<sup>11</sup> Which speaks to you?
9. Jeremiah 32:35 mentions child sacrifice as one of the acts that provoked God's anger. In what ways do we sacrifice children today as a result of our commitment to fossil fuels?
10. Jim Ball has written a book entitled, *Global Warming and the Risen Lord*. What difference does "a risen Lord" make in the face of climate change and our discussions of it?

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<sup>10</sup> Nick Spencer, Robert White and Virginia Vrobesky, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009) 62.

<sup>11</sup> New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing frequently speaks of sickness and healing with regard to climate change.

## Knowing Your Place

### Place Questions

1. What are the primary sources of CO<sub>2</sub> within your map area?
2. What energy sources generate the electricity in your home and church building? If fossil fuels are used, where do they come from?
3. How is climate change expected to affect your region?
4. Are people within your map area planning for climate change? Are there business or government leaders who are concerned about this?

## Practices

### Spiritual Practices

1. **Intercession:** Post a picture on your refrigerator to help you remember to pray for humans or animals affected by climate change. The *National Geographic* site has photo galleries that you could download:  
[Pictures of a Warming World](#)  
[Flood, Drought and Climate Change](#)
2. **Lament:** Review the projected impacts of climate change for your region. (The Leader's Guide for session 6 provides information on this.) Then go to a natural area you love—or your own backyard—and imagine what it might look like if these impacts come true. Mourn for the losses this change would entail and write a lament for them.
3. **Memorize this sentence:** "I'm a Christian, and I think we should do something about climate change even if it costs us." Say it to your boss and your city council. Say it to your senators and congress people. Say it to your friends at basketball games and your neighbors at block parties. Write the president. Repeat.

Why does it matter that you are a Christian? Politicians tend to respect this voting bloc. They also see Christians as people who network.

4. **Use the ecological lens questions** to explore the primary and related passages from Jeremiah listed with the essay.

## Household Practices

1. **Calculate your carbon footprint.** Try one of the online carbon calculators below to calculate your yearly contribution to the atmosphere. Play with the numbers to see what changes would make the most difference in the size of your footprint. New to this idea? See page 6-11 for more information.
  - [Cool Climate Network](#) This site gives you simple and more advanced options for figuring out your footprint.
  - [Carbon Footprint Calculator](#) This site is easy to use, but you need to have your utility records nearby. It also has a tab for businesses.

Additional household practices related to fossil fuel use appear under Session 10, Simple Abundance.

2. **Think justice, not charity.** Sadly, the poorest people create the least CO<sub>2</sub> emissions but suffer the grimmest consequences of climate change. Give money to an organization that works with climate change, either by helping disaster victims, mitigating effects or raising awareness. Consider an automatic monthly deposit that you think of as justice, not charity. Tree planting projects, helping low-income people weatherize, health kits for disaster victims are just a few examples.
3. **Organize a voluntary gas tax group:** Group members agree to “tax” their gasoline expenditures in recognition that the price we pay at the pump is not the full cost of using gasoline. They meet to pool their money and decide where to give it.

## Additional Resources

*Note that sites change links frequently. If a link is broken, try pasting the name of the organization into your browser and chances are it is still out there.*

### Government Sites

#### [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#)

The IPCC is the internationally accepted authority on climate change. This body of scientists from many different nations reviews the scientific literature on climate change and issues reports every few years. The latest report year is 2014. The reports cover the physical science basis of climate change, likely impacts and mitigation. While the reports the IPCC generates are thousands of pages long, their site does a good job of explaining what they do and summarizing results.

**[NASA Global Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet](#)** The National Aeronautics and Space Administration studies Earth from space. This site reviews key indicators of climate change and its effects. If you like technological solutions, you'll enjoy their [Energy Innovations](#)

page. Read about things like artificial photosynthesis and wind generators that fly loose like kites, never mind the tower.

**National Park Service Web Site BEGINNERS START HERE.**

This is an easy-to-read site with very basic information about climate change. The most interesting pages are those that feature the ways climate change is affecting [our national parks](#). Read about receding glaciers at Mt. Rainer National Park, rising sea levels at Assateague Island National Seashore, and more.

**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)**

Cruise their Climate Center, or see how the temperature has fluctuated in your region over the past 100 years [here](#).

**U.S. Global Change Research Program**

Find reports on climate change and your own region [here](#).

**Christians on Climate Change**

**Ball, Jim. *Global Warming and the Risen Lord: Christian Discipleship and Climate Change*. Washington, D.C.: Evangelical Environmental Network, 2010.**

Ball links his family's experience with the Civil Rights Movement to climate change in a thought provoking fashion. His focus on Jesus Christ risen pulsates throughout the book creating positive energy where many despair.

**Creation Justice Ministries**

Creation Justice Ministries offers a long list of climate change resources from the mainline Protestant side of things. These include several curricula on climate change and reflections on how climate change will affect core church ministries.

**Evangelical Climate Change Initiative**

Concern for the poor takes center stage in this call to action from Evangelical leaders. "Our deep commitment to Jesus Christ and his commands to love our neighbors, care for 'the least of these,' and be proper stewards of His creation compels us to act," they say.

**Hayhoe, Katharine, and Andrew Farley. *A Climate for Change: Global Warming Facts for Faith-based Decisions*. New York, NY: FaithWords, 2009.**

Hayhoe is a climate scientist; Farley is a pastor from Texas. Together, they are well equipped to help Christians think through climate change and respond with action.

**Lausanne Global Consultation on Creation Care**

In 2012, representatives from 26 countries met and named creation care an urgent issue for Christians. They call for prayer, simple lifestyle, robust theological work, and mobilization of the whole Church. This document influenced the creation care resolution that MCCN proposed to the Mennonite Church USA in 2013, generating the *Every Creature Singing* curriculum.

**Spencer, Nick, R. S. White, and Virginia Vroblesky. *Christianity, Climate Change, and Sustainable Living*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009.**

The authors present a strong biblical case and an engaging, hopeful approach to sustainable living. This book emphasizes the local causes of climate change and the lifestyle changes that can make a difference.

## **Business and Industry**

Here are just a few industries that are being challenged to rethink “business as usual” due to climate change.

### **[Exxon Mobile: Climate Policy](#)**

What does a large multinational oil company say about climate change? The company’s public position since 2002 has been to acknowledge the problem. However, Exxon has funded organizations that deny climate change behind the scenes since then. See how they are [reducing greenhouse gasses](#) in their operations.

### **[Institute for Climate Change and Agriculture, Cornell University](#)**

This institute “facilitates research, education and outreach to reduce the agricultural sectors’ collective impact on the climate, and help farmers to become more resilient to climate change.”

### **[Insurance in a Climate of Change](#)**

The insurance industry first noted [climate change as a concern in 1973](#), and it has had an organization devoted to this issue since the 1990s. This site is a bit dry, but a good example of how some industries have been preparing for climate change for a long time.

### **[The Threat to Fisheries and Aquaculture from Climate Change](#)**

Fish is the primary source of animal protein for a billion people worldwide. The effects of changing temperatures, precipitation and stronger storms on fisheries are a serious concern.

## **Other**

### **[350.org](#)**

This advocacy organization takes its name from the recommended maximum carbon dioxide level: 350 parts per million. Founder Bill McKibben’s calls to resist the Keystone Pipeline and divest from owning fossil fuel stocks have engaged a number of Christian denominations.

### **[Chasing Ice](#)**

This is a documentary featuring photographer James Balog’s mission to record the melting of glaciers with cameras. The film is sobering but beautiful.

### **[The Psychology of Climate Change Communication](#)**

This is a free online guide from the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions. It can help you communicate about climate change. [Here's a brief summary.](#)

## Session 6 Carbon Footprint Handout

### What is a carbon footprint?

Your carbon footprint is the amount of greenhouse gas your lifestyle emits in a year's time. Individuals, organizations, cities, nations and products all have a carbon footprint that can be calculated, or at least estimated. This measure includes heating and cooling, transportation, diet and other purchases. Some aspects of your carbon footprint are direct and easy to calculate, such as how many kilowatts of electricity you use in a year. Others are indirect, such as the amount of carbon emissions required to make your computer. Even if the emissions took place in another country, they were made for the buyers' benefit, not the workers' benefit.

### Why calculate your carbon footprint?

Doing the math can help you see what changes would lead to the most significant reductions in your contribution to climate change. For a typical U.S. household, transportation is the single largest source of emissions, followed by housing, food and goods consumed. Meat contributes the highest carbon footprint within the food category. The average U.S. household is responsible for about 50 tons of carbon per year. This is about five times the global average of 10 tons per household.<sup>12</sup> The per capita carbon footprint for the U.S. is around 17 tons per person.<sup>13</sup>

### How do I calculate my carbon footprint?

Below are two of the many carbon calculators available on the web. You provide answers to a series of questions about miles traveled, energy used, income and lifestyle, and the calculator crunches the numbers for you. Most carbon calculators also provide concrete tips on how to reduce your footprint. Play around with different answers to the questions to see which changes would make the most difference.

#### [Cool Climate Network](#)

This site gives you simple and more advanced options for figuring out your footprint.

#### [Carbon Footprint Calculator](#)

This site is easy to use, but you need to have your utility records nearby. It also has a tab for businesses.

### See a [product life cycle assessment](#) for a pair of jeans.

That's when a business does a detailed analysis of all steps in the life cycle of a product, from raw materials to waste disposal in order to determine how best to save energy and water. See the summary on page 12 of this resource.

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher Jones and Daniel Kammen, (2011). "Quantifying Carbon Footprint Reduction Opportunities for U.S. Households and Communities". *Environmental Science & Technology* 45 (9): 4088–4095.

<sup>13</sup> Data from the [United Nations](#), the U.S. Department of Energy's [Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center](#) and the [World Bank](#) are all in the 17-ton range.



## Session 7: Hearing from the Global Community

### *Knowing Your Faith*

*Jump to [Discussion Questions](#)*

*[Knowing Your Place](#)*

*[Practices](#)*

*[Resources](#)*

**Scripture:** Ephesians 2:14-22

**Suggested Eco-Lens Questions:** Try B and E.

When we hear people from other cultures talking about issues related to the environment, their perspectives often surprise us.

“Are you noticing climate change in your country? How is it affecting your people?” I asked my friend, Yasir, on his last visit to the States. Yasir is from the city of Khartoum in the Sudan.

“Yes, we are seeing it. The strong savanna is becoming weak savanna, and the weak savanna is becoming desert. More women are being raped.”

Rape? I knew the effects of climate change were wide-ranging, but I wasn’t getting the connection to violence against women.

“Yes, the women have to go further and further to gather firewood. When they scatter like that, they are more vulnerable to roving bands of men. So there is more rape.”

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My friend Ruth, who teaches English in China, tells me I must visit her city to understand how important work on behalf of the earth is. She describes the lack of bird song and the hacking coughs people live with from the constant fog of air pollution.

Recently, Ruth hosted a group of Chinese middle school children on a tour of the United States. “The group was shocked by our road kill here,” she told me. I looked at her blankly.

“Yes, they don’t have road kill where they come from.”

“Why? Not enough cars?”

“No. Plenty of cars: not enough animals. The little animals are all gone.”

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Joanne Moyer, a member of Mennonite Creation Care Network’s council, shares tantalizing stories about her research in Kenya. According to Joanne, the North American debate that pits the environment against people’s economic wellbeing looks very different in Kenya.



“Problems like deforestation and climate change are so widespread and urgent there,” she explains. “People worry about how they will cook their food and what they will use to build their houses as the forests disappear at alarming rates. . . . We in North America have the luxury of debating the importance of environmental issues. This is not the case for everyone.”

Each of these three vignettes offers an intriguing window into another world. Hearing them makes me feel like I am peering through a crack in one of the dividing walls that the Apostle Paul describes in Ephesians 2. He says that Christ came and proclaimed peace to two groups distant from each other, making both groups members of the household of God. While I don’t feel hostility toward the nations mentioned above, I rarely focus on Chinese cities and Sudanese wood gatherers. Walls loom between us.

Why break down a wall? A broken wall is good news when you want or need something on the other side of it. If Europeans enjoy a standard of living similar to North America but consume about half as much carbon per person,<sup>1</sup> wouldn’t we want to know how they’re doing that? If our lifestyles contribute to a rape problem in the Sudan, we need to know that too and feel it in our guts. And what a breath of fresh air a Kenyan could inject into our tired debates pitting the environment against the economy!

Walls between people can also affect the earth. I saw this during a workshop I attended while visiting Phoenix, Arizona last summer. The presenters discussed the effect of the U.S.-Mexico border wall on the local ecology and showed pictures of animal migrations interrupted by the wall. They also told about the many environmental laws that are waived in the name of national security. We saw pictures of vehicle damage to fragile desert soils due to the constant surveillance along the wall.

Paul’s dividing walls sound like they’re topped with barbed wire and patrolled by armed guards too. Yet we know from other scriptures that some of the hostility Paul talks about was addressed through ordinary decisions made at the dinner table. Day by day, Jews ate with Gentiles and Gentiles gave up eating meat offered to idols for the sake of their communities. Sometimes our own walls are just as surmountable. Things as simple as a quality website, clear instructions or the right contact person can be enough to boost a seeker over the wall into a much-needed cross-cultural exchange.

What I find most exciting about Ephesians 2 is that the pieces of the wall don’t disappear; they are transformed. A new synthesis replaces the division, using the raw materials from each side. No one is left out; opposing camps are forged into a living, growing building that serves as a home for the Spirit. “Under no circumstances can we claim to have Christ on our side alone,” says Marcus Barth in his book, *The Broken Wall*.<sup>2</sup> Rather, Christ serves as a keystone that joins the two sides of an arch, allowing them to bear weight and form a doorway.

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<sup>1</sup> Contrast [World Bank CO<sub>2</sub> Emissions per Capita](#) with a quality of life indicator, such as the [OECD Better Life Index](#). Here’s a story to go with the data: [What Makes Europe Greener than the U.S.?](#)

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Barth, *The Broken Wall* (Regent College Publishing, 1959).

## Discussion Questions

### Key Ideas

1. Do you find Paul's image of a broken wall inspiring, appealing or naïve? Why?
2. What "walls" prevent you from hearing from the global community on creation care issues? Which of these would be within your power to break down?
3. What opportunities does your congregation have to interact directly with people from international locations? Make a list of questions you would like to ask them related to their use of natural resources. Also list comments you've heard from internationals about North American use of resources.
4. Are there dividing walls within your congregation that are related to environmental issues? Name them. How can you work together toward common goals in spite of these walls? What would it take to break them down? How is community life affected if these walls are never discussed?

### Supplementary Questions

5. Are international environmental issues covered in the news sources you read? What issues are you aware of through the Church press? Where are some good places to find world environmental news?
6. The essay mentions the U.S.-Mexico border as a wall with consequences for surrounding ecosystems. Can you think of other examples of human dividing walls that have caused environmental damage? Walls need not be made of stone or barbed wire to cause harm.
7. Have you ever felt that you were not a "member of the household of God" because of your stance on a particular environmental issue? What insights do you feel you have to offer the body of Christ?
8. Have you ever been involved in breaking down a wall? What feelings did you have? Did the action create fear or hope?

## *Knowing Your Place*

### Place Questions

1. What ethnic or social groups different from yours living within your region? Are there congregations of different nationalities, races or religions? How do you think these other congregations would answer the questions in this study?
2. What kinds of goods are shipped to your region from international locations? Choose one or more common products and research where they come from.

## *Practices*

### Spiritual Practices

1. **Listening to the global community:** For one week, suppose that hearing global voices on issues related to creation care is your priority. How will you listen? What messages from this other world challenge you? Pray for someone on the other side of a wall.
2. **Listening to opposing perspectives nearby:** For one week, suppose that hearing nearby voices that you disagree with on environmental issues is your priority. How will you listen? What messages from this other world challenge you? Pray for someone on the other side of a wall.

### Household Practices

1. **Navigate household conflicts:** Even the most amiable households can have disagreements about what creation care steps to implement. Conflicts over who is going to drop off the recycling or whether to buy organic vegetables can discourage doing anything at all. Discuss any such tensions at your house this week. Do you understand the other person's position? Can you find common ground?
2. **Map your consumer goods:** Thanks to Country of Origin Labeling laws, it is easy to tell where many of the products we buy come from. Unseen hands around the world pick our vegetables, sew our clothes and wire our electronics. Walk around your house checking labels. Make a list of where items in your house came from. Pick one or two products you regularly buy and see what you can find out about the country they came from or the industry that produced them there. Even not finding any information tells you something.

3. **Develop fair trade brand loyalty:** Read about fair trade products and practices at one or more of the sites below. Note that fair trade certification requires [healthy environmental practices](#) as well as just wages. You probably already know about fair trade coffee, but did you know you can also get fair trade certified shoes, clothing, basketballs, lotions and more? Find an item you would like to buy fair trade and do the math. What would it cost you per year to make the welfare of the community that produces this item a priority? What adjustments would you need to make in your consumption habits?
- [Equal Exchange](#)      [Ten Thousand Villages](#)
  - [Fair Trade USA](#) See their Global Reach Map

## Additional Resources

### [Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love](#)

This two-page handout from the Mennonite Church USA website outlines guidelines for discussions when people do not agree.

### [Ancient Roots](#)

Ancient Roots is a website devoted to preserving traditional ecological knowledge in India, such as ways to harvest water. "Preserving ecological traditions is...necessary and absolutely essential for the survival of the planet," the site's mission statement says. The book corner includes a series of children's books entitled, *Ecological Tales from India*.

**Daneel, Marthinus, *African Earthkeepers: Wholistic Interfaith Mission*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001.**

This book describes a movement within the African Independent Church in Zimbabwe.

### [Indigenous People's Restoration Network](#)

What is traditional ecological knowledge and why is it important today? This site, representing a working group of the Society for Ecological Restoration, will bring you up to speed on that question.

**Kingsolver, Barbara. *Flight Behavior: A Novel*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012.**

This popular novel explores environmental issues involving monarch butterflies from the perspective of a working-class woman from West Virginia struggling to make ends meet.

**Longacre, Doris Janzen, with Valerie Weaver-Zercher, ed. *Living More with Less, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010.**

Don't miss chapter 6, "Learn from the World Community," pages 49-60. This section reports on what people from around the globe had to say when invited to offer suggestions to North Americans on how to live more simply.

### [Lausanne Global Consultation on Creation Care](#)

In 2012, representatives from 26 countries met and named creation care an urgent issue for Christians. This international body called for prayer, simple lifestyle, robust theological work, and mobilization of the whole Church. Their document influenced the MCCN resolution.

### [Why Traditional Knowledge Holds the Key to Climate Change](#)

This is an article about the importance of learning from traditional peoples living on the margins of society.

## Session 8: Claiming Our Citizenship

### *Knowing Your Faith*

Jump to: [Discussion Questions](#)

[Knowing Your Place](#)

[Practices](#)

[Resources](#)

**Scripture:** Ephesians 2:19-20, Luke 19:1-10

**Related Texts:** Acts 22:22-29, Letter to Philemon

**Suggested Eco-Lens Questions:** Try E and F with Luke 19:1-10.

*“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.” – Ephesians 2:19-20*

#### **Who are we as citizens?**

It is a wonderful thing to be a citizen of a country: to belong somewhere, to be welcome in the workplace, to claim a niche in the community and to cross boundaries without fear. Three times in the past five years, our congregation has witnessed the tears, anxiety, struggle and expense that people without U.S. citizenship go through to obtain it. When the money was raised, the paperwork submitted and resubmitted, the scams untangled, the bureaucrats satisfied and the long waits without income or peace of mind over, it was always a cause for celebration!

It is ironic that many of us who are born into this privilege take our rights so lightly. Those of us who are North American Mennonites from the cradle are often ambivalent about our citizenship. We do not identify with many of our government's policies, particularly the reliance on military solutions to problems. Keeping our U.S. citizenship at arms' length, we instead claim citizenship in the body of Christ, the reign of God or our congregations. While kingdom citizenship puts our primary loyalties in the right place, sometimes we interpret this identity in ways that are abstract and otherworldly. Our reluctance to embrace all that goes along with politics can make us apathetic and inattentive citizens of our planet. Often we are much clearer about what we are against than what we are for.

If we are going to claim citizenship in Christ, let us remind ourselves what that looks like. In Ephesians 2:19, a text covered in session 7, Paul speaks of Christians as “citizens of the household of God.” Elsewhere, he speaks of us as members of a body. Session 3 mentioned Cherokee theologian Randy Woodley, one of a number of ecologically minded Christians who believe that “the community of creation” is a helpful contemporary paraphrase of the Kingdom of God language in the New Testament. Whether we call it a kingdom, a community, a body or a household, citizenship in Christ has these characteristics:

- The household of God is a socially and politically untidy place. We are apt to run into people from the wrong side of whatever boundaries matter to us and are expected to work and worship with them.

- The household of God aligns us with children and the poor. It aligns us with prostitutes and repentant tax collectors. All these are said to be entering the kingdom ahead of mature, middle class, respectable people.<sup>1</sup>
- The household of God includes creation. Nations may treat the natural world as little more than a factory to supply human need. But in the household of God, each part of creation is brought into being by God's presence, beloved by God, and responsive to God.

This latter point frees us to be enthusiastic citizens of particular places. We are citizens of watersheds and mountains; citizens of plains and deciduous forests; citizens of mesas and valleys and deserts, all in need of our heartfelt loyalty. In Christ, the reconciler of all things, we are no longer strangers to the landscapes we inhabit. We are no longer alienated from other species but recognize their pain and their praise. If we see ourselves as citizens of the community of creation, it transforms our loyalties and our responsibilities. We can be passionately loyal to our geography, if not always to our government.

### **How do citizens of Christ speak to their governments?**

What biblical stories might nurture our witness to city, state and national governments? I searched in vain for a text that would encourage Christians to write polite letters to their senators and attend town meetings. Rather, in the ancient world, speaking truth to power was a contact sport. Lions snarled hungrily at me from the book of Daniel. A distraught Esther marched off to the palace, one scepter away from death. Palace thugs dropped Jeremiah into a pit and John the Baptist lost his head due to a woman's revenge. If you're prepared to engage in civil disobedience on behalf of truth and justice, you have all the biblical grounds you need.

Thankfully, there are other starting points for those of us who find witnessing to our *neighbors* difficult, let alone our governments. As I worked on this session, my colleagues at Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center nudged me to think more broadly about what it means to take a political stance. "All of us are influencers, and we can all learn to use that influence more effectively," Luke Gascho, our executive director, told me. Luke teaches a course in leadership for our graduate students, so he sees a wide array of people gingerly learning to lead. We need to find the forms of leadership that are authentic to the persons we are, he says.

"Even the most harmless actions can still have a political effect," Dave Ostergren told me. Dave, who teaches our policy courses, related a story about a congressman who changed his mind on an issue because a friend shared a conviction with him at a basketball game.

With this advice in mind, let's revisit the New Testament and consider just a few of the political acts found there.

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<sup>1</sup> See Matthew 19:13-15, Luke 6:20, Matthew 21:31

- **Sharing a meal** (*Luke 19: 1-10*)

Most of us remember Zacchaeus as the “wee little man” we encountered in children’s Sunday school. We were all glad that Jesus got this sorry outcast out of a tree and befriended him. Actually, there was a reason Zacchaeus was not an object of pity among Jews in his own time. That wee little man was “very rich” and a chief tax collector. This indicts him as deeply involved in the corrupt tax system of the Roman government and the extortion that it bred. Jesus not only crosses political lines to eat with Zacchaeus; he likely brought his consistent concern for the poor with him to the table. When salvation comes to Zacchaeus’ house in verse 9, it also comes to the needy taxpayers who will now receive a share of Zacchaeus’ wealth.

- **Grasping a vision, seeing a need** (*Matthew 21:12-17*)

Never mind for the moment the courage that Jesus needed to overturn tables, shoo animals and incur the wrath of the establishment when he cleansed the temple. Consider this story first of all as an act of vision. Hundreds of people walked through the Jerusalem temple every day and saw only business as usual—doves cooing, coins tinkling, moneychangers making a buck. This is how it had been as long as they could remember.

Before there was any need for courage and action, there was a need for eyes to see what was wrong. Drawing on Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, Jesus envisioned the temple as a house of prayer, where the blind and the lame could come for healing. (They are mentioned in Matthew 21:14, but they are not supposed to be there according to Jewish law.)

- **Challenging a friend** (*Philemon and other Pauline letters*)

The Apostle Paul wrote quite a few letters in between shipwrecks and prison terms. They were penned to churches, not political figures, but that doesn't mean they didn't address local politics or challenge powerful people. While Paul doesn't overtly condemn the institution of slavery, it is clear that he sees Onesimus as much more than a slave, and expects Philemon to value him as well. “Welcome him as you would welcome me,” Paul says.

- **Using our rights for justice** (*Acts 22:22-29*)

The Apostle Paul says little about his Roman citizenship. Despite the honor and special privileges it entailed, he never mentions it in his letters. Nevertheless, twice in the book of Acts, he makes use of this birthright.

“Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen?” Paul queries in Acts 22:25 as a centurion is tying him up in preparation for a beating. They both know it isn’t, and the penalty for flogging a Roman citizen without a trial is stiff. Earlier, in Acts 16:37, Paul also uses his citizenship to demand just treatment. His Roman pedigree ultimately gets him a free trip to Rome to appeal to the emperor and to fulfill his goal of visiting the church nearby.

In 1968, the Mennonite Central Committee Washington Office formed because international workers kept returning home bearing pleas from their friends in Vietnam to do something U.S. citizens could do better than anyone else: speak to the U.S. government about the



consequences of its policies.<sup>2</sup> Like Esther, who found herself uniquely placed “for such a time as this,” they could not keep silent in the face of violence and injustice.

Christians have a heritage that inspires political witness. We have been given a vision of a community rooted in shalom for all creatures. Our tradition trains us to align ourselves with children, the earth and the poor. Here in North America, we are blessed with freedom of speech and the right to choose our representatives. We have opportunities for education and communication that many in other parts of the world can only dream of. **How can we be silent?**

## Discussion Questions

### Key Ideas

1. How do you see yourself in relation to the land and community you currently inhabit? Are you a citizen, an alien, a settler, an immigrant, a tourist or something else? How does this identity affect your sense of responsibility for the land?
2. If you were going to invest your time in changing a policy related to environmental justice or creation care, what issue would you choose? Why? How would you proceed?
3. Which of these habits do you have?
  - \_\_\_ reading the newspaper
  - \_\_\_ voting in local elections
  - \_\_\_ following public issues
  - \_\_\_ participating in community groups that benefit the common good
  - \_\_\_ volunteering beyond the walls of your congregation
  - \_\_\_ serving on a city council, school board or other decision-making bodies
  - \_\_\_ contacting political representatives about matters that concern you
  - \_\_\_ engaging in civil disobedience if all else fails

How did you develop these habits, or what prevented you from developing them? How have you encouraged these practices in other people?

Can you think of ways to broaden the habits you have to include attention to the health of the environment? For example, if you tutor at-risk children, have you thought about how air quality or environmental hazards in their neighborhoods might be affecting them?

4. What barriers keep you from participating in decisions related to land, water or air quality in your community? Are they internal or external?

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<sup>2</sup> Contact Mennonite Central Committee's [Washington Office](#) to learn more about this history.

## Supplementary Questions

1. In what ways is your congregation a public witness to God's love for creation? How might you help outsiders understand these actions? For example, suppose you have turned part of your church lawn into a patch of native prairie grasses. Is there signage explaining what's growing there and why?
2. Some in your congregation may not feel they have a voice to advocate for their need for clean water, air and land. How can your congregation empower them?

## Knowing Your Place

### Place Questions

1. What organizations within your area are responsible for overseeing the environmental health of the area? What do they do?
2. How does one gain input into these groups?

## Practices

### Spiritual Practices

1. **Intercessory prayer:** Pray for a local environmental governing body or advocacy group. Learn the names of the people who are part of this body.
2. **Biblical models:** Spend time with one or more of the texts about citizenship or political action mentioned in the essay. Apply the ecological lens questions.
3. **Read Martin Luther King Jr.'s [\*Letter from a Birmingham Jail\*](#)**, devotionally. Who is speaking these words to you today? Do you have a calling to any kind of direct action on behalf of the planet?
4. **Monitor yourself:** If you are a person with pronounced opinions about environmental issues, spend this week paying attention to the comments and assumptions you make about people and groups who disagree with you. Refrain from the following, or note when you do them:
  - Making stereotypical or demeaning comments about your opponents.
  - Watching media that polarizes issues or demonizes "the enemy."
  - Allowing comfortable assumptions to replace careful thought.

Remember that being a person of peace is not so much about espousing a ideology (though some positions are more compatible with Christianity than others.) Rather, how we inhabit our ideologies is what marks us as followers of Jesus Christ.

5. **Write your own pledge of allegiance:** Read Ellie Schoenfield's poem, "[Patriotism](#)." In it, she describes her loyalty to the soil. Play around with creative ways to state where your allegiance lies.

## Household Practices

1. **Remember this sentence from Session 6?** "I'm a Christian, and I think we should do something about climate change even if it costs us." Say it to your boss and your city council. Say it to your senators and congress people. Say it to your friends at basketball games and your neighbors at block parties. Write the president. Repeat again.
2. **Take a walk** around your neighborhood with a small notebook in hand and make a list of all the policies you encounter that affect the care of creation. For example:
  - Houses must meet building codes that make them more or less efficient.
  - Someone had to decide how to handle the storm water from the street.
  - Some cities have weed ordinances that limit what can grow on a property.

Do you question the wisdom of any of these policies? Do you see a need for policies that don't exist?

3. **Choose a new source of news** to follow on a regular basis that could help you become a better caretaker of creation. See Additional Resources for options.
4. **Write a letter** to an elected official expressing your views on a creation care issue that concerns you. Politicians consider one voice to represent about 100 people. See Mennonite Central Committee's [How to be an Advocate](#) for tips. Could your household make this a weekly practice?
5. **Post guidelines:** Write these three questions on a card and post them near where you watch or read news. Use them to help you evaluate political issues that come by you.
  - Are people speaking on their own behalf for policies that benefit only themselves, or are they seeking the common good?
  - Are people considering effects on creation as well as on humans when they support a given policy?
  - Can those speaking envision their political enemies as part of the solution?
6. **Encourage someone:** Write a kind note to someone whose ecological leadership, business or farming practices you respect.
7. **Start a public affairs club** for high school students or young adults in your community. Include an environmental justice focus. According to a study by the Center for

Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, youth who do not attend college have fewer opportunities to learn civic engagement than their college-attending peers do<sup>3</sup>. This often excludes their voices from the public arena.

## *Additional Resources*

Use these sites to keep up with climate change news and legislation:

- The [Environmental Study and Energy Institute](#) reviews the top climate science, business, and politics stories of the week and provides a list of pending federal legislation.
- [Friends Committee on National Legislation](#) is a Quaker lobby in the public interest.

### How to be an Advocate

Mennonite Central Committee's [Washington Office](#) provides tips on visiting your representatives, writing letters to politicians, writing letters to the editor and using social media.

### League of Conservation Voters

The League of Conservation Voters works to turn environmental values into national, state and local priorities. Here, you can keep on top of environmental issues and see a scorecard showing how your congressperson and senators voted.

King, Martin Luther. [Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#), August 1963.

King responds to arguments against his use of civil disobedience. His steps for using it are:

- determine whether injustices exist,
- negotiate,
- spend time in self-purification to make sure you are capable of non-violent action,
- take direct action

Sawtell, Peter. [Eco-Justice Notes](#)

The author is the director of [Eco-Justice Ministries](#) and a thoughtful writer. His weekly missives bring a theological eye to current events related to human justice and earth justice.

### The Politics of Jesus Simplified

This is an online summary of the classic by John Howard Yoder that establishes the political nature of Jesus' ministry and his relevance for social ethics.

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<sup>3</sup> Constance Flanagan, et. al. [Civic Engagement and the Changing Transition to Adulthood](#).