

...and a Little Child Shall Lead Them

There is a broad agreement that faith includes concern for the environment as part of God's creation. As faith communities become more active on environmental initiatives, they realize a need to involve their youth.

At the same time, there are also secular concerns about how little time children spend outdoors interacting with nature and what effect that has on their development.

Studies conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Centers for Disease Control, as well as other academic institutions have produced compelling evidence that suggests

children's physical, mental and emotional health correlates with how much interaction with nature and unstructured playtime they have.



"A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children ..."

-Proverbs 13:22

"...and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children..."

- Deuteronomy 6:5-7

"People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.' And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them."

- Mark 10: 13-16

GOD AND THE ENVIRONMENT: AN INTERFAITH PERSPECTIVE

- **Jewish:** God never fully relinquishes dominion over the world. In promulgating the laws of the sabbatical year (Leviticus 25:23), he reasserts his proprietorship over creation, stating, "The land is mine." This principle of divine ownership of nature is the basis for several categories of liturgical blessing. (Jonathan Helfand, "The Earth is the Lord's: Judaism and Environmental Ethics," in Eugene C. Hargrove, ed., Religion and Environmental Crisis, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986.)
- **Catholic:** God, the Source of all that is, is actively present in all creation, but God also surpasses all created things. We can and must care for the earth without mistaking it for the ultimate object of our devotion. We believe that faith in a good and loving God is a compelling source of passionate and enduring care for all creation. (U.S. Catholic Bishops, "Renewing the Earth.")
- **Eastern Orthodox:** The world is a production of God's free will, goodness, wisdom, love and omnipotence. God did not create the world in order to satisfy some need of His. Rather He created it without compulsion and without force in order that it might enjoy His blessings and share in His goodness. God then brought all things into being out of nothing, creating both the visible and the invisible. ("Orthodox Perspectives on Creation.")
- **Mainline Protestant:** Christians believe that the whole creation is God's handiwork and belongs to God (Psalm 24:1). The creation has value in itself because God created and values it (Proverbs 8:29-31). God delights in the creation and desires its wholeness and well-being. God created the earth, affirmed that it was good, and established an everlasting covenant with humanity to take responsibility for the whole of creation. ("American Baptist Policy Statement on Ecology.")
- **Evangelical:** Our creating God is prior to and other than creation, yet intimately involved with it, upholding each thing in its freedom, and all things in relationships of intricate complexity. God is transcendent, while lovingly sustaining each creature; and immanent, while wholly other than creation and not to be confused with it. The Creator's concern is for all creatures. God declares all creation "good" (Gen. 1:31) and promises care in a covenant with all creatures (Gen. 9:9-17)("An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation.")
- **Muslim:** "The human being is the most intelligent and most complex of Allah' creation. But his ultimate purpose is to serve his creator by submitting to the grand design. The building blocks of the physical, spiritual and emotional self are in the context of the pattern of creation (Al-An am:165). Khalifa or the role of guardianship is the sacred duty God has given to the human race. Humankind has a special place in God's scheme. We are more than friends of the earth—we are its guardians." (*Qur'an, Creation and Conservation* by Fazlun Khaled)

EXPLORING THEMES AND SEQUENCES

While researching Sunday school curriculum on creation care, three primary sources were used and evaluated. *Our Neighbor, The Earth* (9-11 year-olds) by Christie L. Jenkins, *Protecting God's Creation: Environmental Justice Resource Manual* by the National Catholic Youth Initiative, and *In the Beginning, God Created the World* by the United Methodist Church. After reviewing the curricula, common themes were established and activities most beneficial to teaching them noted.

Themes for children's religious environmental lessons are typically simple and positive and follow a logical pattern of thought or linear progression with ideas able to expand upon one another. The themes are designed to be an easy-to-understand sequence of ideas and concepts suitable for young children.

A successful class incorporates activities for children to have an opportunity to learn about the natural world around them while exploring their faith. Together, the themes and the activities create curriculum that share a common goal: to teach children that their faith means more than just going to Sunday school or Catechism and church every week, that it means learning to pray not only with our minds and hearts, but our actions as well.

- 1) Foundation: The Earth and all creation belongs to God
 - a. Genesis 1:1-25 The story of creation of the earth and nature
 - b. Genesis 1:26,27 The story of creation of man
 - c. Genesis 2:4-14 The story of creation
 - d. Numbers 35:34 God's omnipresence and expectation of respecting Nature
 - e. Psalm 24:1-6 The earth is the Lord's

Activity: Take the children outside for "scavenger hunt" or exploration of aspects of the creation with followup discussion about what they observed

- 2) God gave us a special responsibility to take care of his creation
 - a. Genesis 1:28-31 God gives man the gift of creation
 - b. Genesis 2:15 Care of the Garden of Eden- a call to stewardship
 - c. Genesis 9:8 God's covenant with Noah- man's responsibility for creation
 - d. Psalm 8: 5-7 God expects humanity to care for creation
 - e. Phil. 2:4-8 Looking out for the interests of others

Activity: • Invite a mother and baby to class and have the class discuss the kind of care the baby needs
• Class pet
• Container garden

- 3) Nature is God's gift to all of us
 - a. Job 12:7-10 Nature teaches us
 - b. Psalm 104: 10-18 The earth is full with the fruit of your works
 - c. Proverbs 13:22 We share creation with future generations
 - d. Luke 6:12, 12:27 Jesus' experience of nature

Activity: • Visit a petting zoo or other exhibit and discuss exotic animals
• Prepare a meal in class, possibly focusing on local foods

- 4) All of Nature gives praise to God.
 - a. Psalm 96:1, 11-12 All of creation worships God
 - b. Daniel 3:74-81 All of creation worships God

Activity: • Hold a congregation-wide "blessing of the animals"
• Celebrate the Jewish holiday TuB'Shvat (New Year of the Trees) by planting a tree at your congregation or the home of a shut-in

Not Taking Care of Creation Means More Health Problems

One of the themes explored in some environmental curricula, such as the Environmental Justice Resource Manual, is that if creation is not cared for, our health suffers the consequences. This theme is not always explored because of the negative tone it infers by talking about illness, disease and even death. The initial impression one wishes to convey to young children is one that is positive and makes them joyful about loving God and His Creation rather than being frightened into submission. Even when exploring scripture to tie into the themes addressed, one should be leery of choosing passages with hostile and negative tones.

Though the issue may be touchy depending on the age group, the concerns raised by hazardous environmental conditions is one which those teaching the curriculum needs to be aware of. How they decide to frame the risks and dangers, if at all, is it up to their discretion as the teacher.

There are examples of demonstrating risk to children without scaring too much. For example, to demonstrate how pesticides can be harmful, the Environmental Justice Resource Manual uses the example of the poisoned apple that Snow White bit into to show how pesticides may make fruit and vegetables “prettier” but harmful to them.

Exposure to toxic substances can affect fetal, infant, and childhood growth, impairing development of their nervous system and causing defects due to hormonal or immunologic effects. Air quality is especially important to the health of our children, as they breathe in more air per pound of body weight than do adults. UV rays from the sun are also more harmful to children, in that their skin and body tissue is immature and absorbs more substances and therefore at greater risk. Typical child behavior also exposes them to environmental hazards not always apparent to adults, such as crawling on a floor where dust, household chemicals, etc. rest or playing outside on a playscape constructed with treated wood. Exposure to harmful toxins at critical stages in childhood development can cause permanent damage. Some of the major risks to watch out for:

Lead poisoning: a leading environmental health hazard for young children, affecting as many as 1.7 million children age five and under. Though lead paint is no longer on the market (since 1978) more than 80% of the homes built before that time were painted with the poison paint. Why is lead so dangerous? Children’s bodies absorb lead in

amounts 4 to 5 times greater than adults and also have a higher retaining rate.

Lead also tastes sweet, which makes toddlers and infants more susceptible to putting things with lead in them in their mouth. Some leading concerns about lead poisoning is that it causes I.Q. deficiencies, reading and learning disabilities and impaired hearing.

Poor Air Quality and Asthma: Children take in more air relative to their body weight than do adults and spend more time outdoors (at least we hope so) which usually increases the demand for oxygen. In our day and age of urban sprawl, gas-guzzling vehicles, and industrial pollution, poor air quality has been proven to cause respiratory problems in children, namely, asthma.

Since 1980, asthma deaths have been on the rise, increasing by more than 118%, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Secondhand tobacco smoke has also been affecting children’s health by contributing to poor air quality, even to the extent that the CDC has found that it causes 16 million more days of restricted activity, 10 million more days of bed confinement, and 7 million missed school days annually due to acute and chronic respiratory conditions.

Water Contamination: a major concern in child health, as Infants and children drink more fluids per body weight than do adults. In 1995 the Environmental Protection Agency estimated that 30 million Americans drank water from systems that violate one or more public health standards. Because their bodies absorb and retain water at a much higher rate than adults, children are also at risk when swimming or playing in contaminated ocean, lake or pond water.

Pesticides: a serious threat to children beginning in the womb. The breast milk of many American women has higher levels of DDT than is allowed by the FDA in cow’s milk. With their organ systems in critical developmental stages, exposure to pesticides poses a threat which should not be treated lightly, as children receive up to 35% of their entire lifetime exposure to pesticides before the age of 5.

RESOURCES FOR INCORPORATING ENVIRONMENTAL THEMES INTO YOUTH MINISTRIES

Below are some examples of existing curriculum on the care of creation for young children:

Loving Our Neighbor, The Earth (9-11 year-olds) by Christie L. Jenkins. Resource Publications. Available on the publisher's website: <http://www.rpinet.com/>

Protecting God's Creation: Environmental Justice Resource Manual by the National Catholic Youth Initiative. Available on the NFCYM online store:

<https://store.nfcymoffice.net/shop/pc/viewPrd.asp?idcategory=7&idproduct=23>

God's Good World by Vera K. White. Presbyterian Church USA. Available on the PCUSA online store: <http://www.pcusa.org/environment/resources.htm>

In the Beginning, God Created the World. Available for download on the United Methodist Church website: <http://new.gbqm-umc.org/resources/children/>

Other resources parents and teachers can use to learn more on children and nature:

- Louv, Richard. *Last Child in the Woods* (2005)
- Cornell, Joseph. *Sharing Nature with Children* (1998)
- Elkind, David. *The Power of Play*



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