

Every Creature Singing

Embracing the Good News for Planet Earth

Participant Guide:

Unit 3: Choosing a Simple Lifestyle

[Read introduction](#) to the curriculum

Session 9	Rethinking the Market Economy
Session 10	Simple Abundance
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Session 9: Rethinking the Market Economy

Knowing Your Faith

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Scripture: Matthew 6:24-33

Related Texts: Ezekiel 34:18, Mark 4:1-20

Suggested Eco-Lens Questions: Try B and C with Matthew 6:24-33.

By Jerrell Ross Richer

The year was 1977. The place was Green Mountain High School in Lakewood, Colorado. It was a cold winter afternoon, and I was sitting behind a desk in social studies class. I remember listening to my social studies teacher describe communism and the dangers he perceived of the cold war.

I was an impressionable boy and that night I had a dream. In my dream I found myself living in Moscow in the former Soviet Union, working for the communist party, of all things. I had quietly climbed the ranks of the party structure, waiting to arrive at a position of power. I was now one of the leaders of the party, an insider with the respect of my comrades and the authority of my position. And soon would come the moment of truth: the moment when I would use my position to speak the truth about Soviet-style communism, exposing its evil deeds and authoritarian nature and bringing down the system from within. Do you ever have dreams like that? Dreams where telling the truth is all that is needed to bring about transformation?

Strangely enough, my childhood dream has come true, though it is different in significant ways. The place is not the Soviet Union; it is North America. The time is not the cold war era; it is right now. And the system whose weaknesses and failures I am exposing is not communism. It is what I fear has become a sort of national religion here in North America: economics.

Fast forward to today: I'm in a classroom again. But this time I'm the one standing in front of the blackboard. It's the first day of class, and I'm explaining the basic assumptions of mainstream, neoclassical economics, which include:

- *Scarcity:* there are never enough resources to go around
- *Non-satiation:* we are never satisfied; more is always better
- *Self-interest:* we only care about ourselves
- *Self-sufficiency:* we are independent and capable of caring for ourselves

I point out to my students that if this is the world in which we live, then the path is very clear. We all want more, but there's not enough to go around, so let the competition begin. You might call this an updated version of the survival of the fittest.

But I wonder: is this worldview true, or is it a self-destructive myth?

- Are we capable of taking care of ourselves?
- Are we—should we—be interested only in our own wellbeing?
- Do we really not have enough resources?
- Would having even more make us better off?

Let me ask this question: How many of us will not get enough to eat for lunch today? How many of us would really be better off if we added to our meal another cheeseburger, an extra burrito or an additional helping of mashed potatoes?

For some of us, the problem is not that we have too little to eat, it's that we eat too much. It is not that we don't have enough clothing to wear; it's that we have so many clothes that we can barely fit everything inside the drawers of our dresser. It is not that we don't have enough personal mobility; it's that we spend so much time in our cars, driving so fast to get where we need to go on time that traffic accidents have become a leading cause of fatalities.

For too many of us, the problem is not that we didn't give and receive enough gifts for Christmas, birthdays and anniversaries. Rather, it's that we spent so much money buying gifts last year that we'll need most of this year to pay off our credit card balances. For others, the problem is not that we don't have enough diversions to distract us from our daily routines; it's that we are addicted to them. We survive the drudgery of our everyday lives by living for the next weekend, the next drink, the next pill or the next trip to the shopping mall.

Indeed, plenty of people among us do not have enough food, drink or clothing. This inequality persists because either those in need have not been willing to share this with us or the rest of us have not been faithful in sharing our abundance with them. Either way, there is a problem. But the fact remains that for many of us, perhaps most of us living in North America today, *excess* presents more of a problem than *scarcity*. It is this excess that accelerates the depletion of national resources and the contamination of our air, land and water.

Nevertheless, the notion of scarcity pervades our lives. Think about the conversations we have. How much time do you spend complaining about not having enough? Enough money, enough savings, enough space in your house, or enough time with your family and friends?

Consider the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-20)

A farmer goes out to plant his seed. Some of it falls along the path, some of it on rocky soil, some among thorns and the rest on good soil. The first three crops fail, but the fourth prospers. When asked to explain the parable, Jesus said that the seeds the farmer was sowing are like the word, the gospel, the good news. For the first group, represented by the seed along the path, the word never has a chance to flourish. Birds eat it up before it takes root. For the second group, the seed on rocky soil, people hear the word and receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes, they quickly fall away.

Most applicable to our context, however, is the third group, the seed that falls among thorns. Jesus describes how these people hear the good news and receive it. But “the worries of this

life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful” (v. 19 NIV).

Did you read that list? Are you troubled by the “worries of this life” or the “deceitfulness of wealth?” And where do the “desires for other things” come from?

Most of today’s media—television, radio, newspapers, websites and other “free” sources of information—would not exist if they were unable to stir up our desire for other things. Selling advertising is how the media pay their bills. Advertisers purchase our attention in order to sell their goods and services. Increasing sales leads to economic growth and higher incomes. And to the extent that income is good, so is economic growth.

But we all need more than income to survive. We also need love, leisure, companionship, responsibility, satisfaction, achievement, fun, the joy of children's laughter, the warm glow of giving and a feeling of belonging. Most importantly, we need relationships to those around us and to God, the creator, redeemer and sustainer of us all.

Seeking God’s Kingdom

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus urged his disciples to strive first for the Kingdom of God. Our consumer-driven culture, in contrast, begs us to strive for material things. In Jesus’ day people worried about having enough food, drink and clothing to survive. Today people worry about having what it takes to compete—comfortable cars, smart phones and impressive houses. An ever-growing, heavily marketed collection of electronic devices, beauty aids and tasty treats tempt us daily, taunting us with the illusion that we can consume our way to happiness. And what about our children, who are enveloped in a high-tech, high-stakes world of grades, games and activities that will, it is hoped, prepare them for college?

For many of us, keeping up with the neighbors means more work, more debt and more stress, all in the name of making a living. It is true that income can buy us food, housing, clothes, transportation and other goods. But the acquisition of products like these does not bring fulfillment. As Christ proclaimed, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matthew 6:19)

Have material possessions become your treasures? What about accumulating “bucket list” travel experiences? Or posting photos to show your friends how happy you must be? If so, something may be wrong.

What to do?

- **See possessions as tools, not ends in themselves.** First, let’s consider Christ’s advice to his early followers. Jesus acknowledges that our heavenly Father knows that we need food, drink and clothing. In today’s world, many of us also need personal mobility, electronic communication and access to productivity-enhancing technology. But the mistake we too often make is pursuing these things as if they are ends in themselves. An alternative approach is to see things for what they really are: tools. Striving for God’s kingdom may require some tools, to be sure. But the acquisition of tools is not the objective; the coming of the kingdom is.

Once we consider the goods and services we consume in their proper context, transformation can happen. The tools of modern living must be put into people's hands to be most effective, and then many hands make light work. Distributing goods and services more equally is not only just; it is also necessary since it enables more of God's people to participate in the kingdom project.

Tools must also be benign, designed to create rather than destroy. This principle applies to the effect on the worker using the tool, as well as to the environment where the tool is applied. If we believe that the earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1), then our work must be aligned with the goal of supporting life on this planet and protecting humans and all of God's creatures.

- **Consider the costs of our daily activities.** From an economics perspective, the problem with pollution is that we as consumers or producers do not pay for the messes we make. Our cars, for example, are designed to prevent the driver and any passengers inside from breathing the toxic fumes released when gasoline burns. The exhaust pipe is placed in the rear of the vehicle, as far back as it can go. As we move from place to place, we literally drive away from the problem we create, leaving behind poisonous gasses and particulate matter that pollutes the air for everyone in our wake. But we don't even notice this. When we are sitting inside a vehicle, both our eyes and our passengers' eyes are focused on where we are going. If the exhaust from our engines were released into the air ahead of us rather than behind us, or if it entered the passenger compartment itself, we would feel differently about burning gasoline to get to work, to the store, to church and home again.

The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel once asked: "Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?" (Ezekiel 34:18 NIV)

The authors of a groundbreaking book on sustainability put it this way: "Markets make a good servant but a bad master and a worse religion."¹ It is true that markets, or the market economy, can be of tremendous service when it comes to producing goods and services that people need. Markets can do this even better, however, when consumers and producers pay the full costs of their actions. Polluting the air, water and soil upon which human life depends should not be "free." Ideally, enlightened public policies would be put into place to internalize these external costs, fixing what economists refer to as a market failure. Until that happens, people of conscience are called to consider the full impacts of their activities when going about their daily routines.

In the end, each of us needs to answer this question: Whom will we serve? Will it be God or wealth? As Christ said, it cannot be both. We as Christians are called to manage the money, land, time, energy and others that we have been given in ways that honor God, demonstrate our love for neighbor and protect the world God has created.

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¹ Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins and L. Hunter Lovins, *Natural Capitalism* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1999) 261.

Discussion Questions:

Key Ideas

1. How has your understanding of Christian theology shaped your management of resources? Are there particular texts, teachings or mentors that have had an impact on you? Share a story that might benefit others.
2. Review the bulleted lists on pages 9-1 and 9-2. What do you have too little of and what do you have too much of? Are there areas of your life where the assumption that there is not enough of something governs your life? What else in these lists disturbs you?
3. Think about your recent purchases. Would you consider these things to be tools that enable you to participate in the work of advancing God's kingdom? Or are they something else?
4. The exhaust system of a car enables us to drive away from our pollution. This is a good example of how we often externalize the costs of our behavior. What other examples of externalized costs can you think of? What public policies would you like to see put in place in order to help consumers and producers pay the full cost of their actions? How can we be responsible consumers if these policies don't yet exist?
5. What aspects of our current society's consumption trouble you most? Spend time imagining sustainable alternatives. Experiences in other cultures may help you brainstorm.

Supplementary Questions

6. What is the value of a regional economy? Here are two sets of ideas on that question. Choose a few items from their lists to discuss.

Sarah van Gelder, ["31 ways to Jump Start the Local Economy"](#)
Wendell Berry, ["17 Rules for Sustainable Communities"](#)
7. How can the corporate Church pursue a simple lifestyle? If you were going to write a letter to a church institution giving it "permission" to do something at odds with society's economic expectations, what would you say?
8. Unless we bury our money in the ground, it is never idle. How might our values related to the environment influence:
 - the investments we make and
 - the organizations we support?
9. Do you sometimes pay more for products that are known to be better for the environment or the people that produce them—organic, fair trade, locally-grown? How do you manage the additional expense?

Knowing Your Place

Place Questions

1. Choose a retail business or industry that is located within your map area. Find out what challenges they face in balancing costs and impacts on the environment.
2. Where do the raw materials that your local industries use come from? How are they transported to your region? Could the raw materials be produced locally?
3. How much of your spending supports local businesses? What changes could you make to ensure that the money you spend on goods and services provides income to your neighbors? Is this important to you?

Practices

Spiritual Practices

1. **Claiming economic power:** Spend a day thinking about the power you have as a North American consumer. The economic decisions you make—what to buy, where to shop, how much to save and tithes—will impact your community and the planet we depend on. Think about how you might use your economic power to support the work of God's people.
2. **Fast from one of your electronic pastimes** in order to reflect on Mark 4:19 (the seed among thorns) and Matthew 6:33 (seek first the Kingdom). What do these things mean for your life?
3. **Breathing our own wastes:** Reread the paragraph about vehicle exhaust in the middle of page 9-4. Then find an idling school bus, truck or car (your own?) and stand behind it for a minute. While you are there, pray for those most affected by air pollution. Ask for eyes to see other areas where the costs of your consumption are externalized.

Household Practices

1. **Tools for God's kingdom:** Choose one item you own and find a way to transform it into a tool for God's kingdom, as Richer suggests. Could sharing this resource build community? Can it help you to carry out your vocation? Does someone else need this tool more than you do?

- 2. Voluntary gas tax:** The prices we pay for gasoline do not include all of the costs to the environment or the national security costs required to maintain access to fossil fuels. How would your behavior change if the price of gas were, say, \$10 per gallon as it is in some countries? For a week or a month, experiment with a “voluntary gas tax,” setting aside the difference between \$10 per gallon and the actual price of gas. Then give the money you raise to an organization or cause you care about.

Some areas have voluntary gas tax groups that gather to pool their tax money and decide where to give it.

- 3. Tithing** is an ancient practice that reminds us of the importance of sharing our resources with the church to promote the common good. How much of your income before taxes did you donate to your church or other worthy organizations last year? What would you need to give up in order to increase your donations to ten percent of your before-tax income or some other percentage? Try giving this much next month to see how it changes your habits.
- 4. Investments:** Save money and serve others at the same time with [Everence's Advantage Select High Impact Annuity](#). Grow churches, help nonprofits make environmentally friendly choices and support community development.

Additional Resources

[Center for the Advancement of the Steady State Economy](#)

The mission of CASSE is to advance the steady state economy, with stabilized population and consumption, as a policy goal with widespread public support.

[Ethical Markets](#)

Economist Hazel Henderson, the author of, *Ethical Markets: Growing the Green Economy*, founded this upbeat site. It calls for “the evolution of capitalism beyond current models based on materialism, maximizing self-interest and profit, competition and fear of scarcity.” It provides a wealth of economic news from a green perspective.

[Everence](#)

Everence is the stewardship agency of the Mennonite Church USA, and can help with financial planning from a faith-based perspective.

[Jubilee Economics: Sustainable Economics for One Earth, Not Five](#)

Mexicans and North Americans collaborate on this vision of the biblical Jubilee and how to apply it to the present. They offer a [30-day Jubilee immersion](#) plan that introduces you to all of their resources.

[Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution](#)

This site is related to the book of this title by Hawkins, Lovins and Lovins that is footnoted in the essay. The entire book can be downloaded here.

[Sabbath Economics Collaborative](#)

This site bases its understanding of economics in the Sabbath. “At its root, Sabbath observance is about gift and limits: the grace of receiving that which the creator gives, and the responsibility not to take too much, nor to mistake the gift for a possession,” the authors say.

[The Story of Solutions](#)

This nine-minute cartoon video is from Annie Leonard's Story of Stuff Project. It imagines how we might move our economy in a different direction, just by orienting ourselves toward new goals, such as better health and a healthier environment.

Session 10: Simple Abundance

Knowing Your Faith

Jump to: Discussion Questions

Knowing Your Place

Practices

Resources

Scripture: Psalm 23

Related Texts: Matthew 5:1-11, 6:9-13, 25:31-46, Isaiah 55:1-2

Suggested Eco-Lens Questions: Try A and D with Psalm 23.

Claiming Christianity as home base is a bit like living on top of an archeological tell. A tell is a hill created when many generations of people build and rebuild on the same site. If you dig into a tell, you pass through many layers and can see what people from previous centuries have left behind. Our perch atop the tell of Christian history provides us with a spiritual core that can help us sort through the jumble of lifestyle advice available today. While that core includes considerable diversity, it is grounded in a vision of simple abundance and a respect for the humble tasks of everyday living.

A healthy household is undergirded by a vision of abundant life.

A number of passages could serve as a starting point as we consider what a sane household might look like in the 21st century. The authors of the book, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living* propose Isaiah 40 to 66 as the Bible's most compelling vision of joy-filled living. Jesus' unconventional description of happiness from the Beatitudes offers another source of wisdom. The simplicity of the Lord's Prayer, with its humble request for daily bread, could also anchor a lifetime. Here, we will focus on Psalm 23.

Psalm 23 should not be confined to deathbeds and funerals; it is meant to guide the living. This Psalm is the very picture of *shalom*—the Bible's word for peace, health and contentment. What do we really need to be happy? We need clean water and wholesome food. We need a healthy relationship with the rest of creation. We need safe paths and the presence of God. Everything else is trivia. If the entire planet pursued Psalm 23's vision of the good life, our current environmental problems would be manageable if they existed at all.

“Much of the harm we bring to others, as well as ourselves, stems from costly fantasies about what constitutes real joy,” Paul Wadell says in his book, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*.¹ One could also say that behavior that is environmentally unsustainable is often socially and personally harmful as well. A long car commute to work is one example; overeating is another. Sustainable living is not so much a burdensome limitation of our freedom as an opportunity to redirect our lives toward God's purposes and our own best interests. If we do so, we may

¹ Paul J. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008) 2.

discover that living within the constraints of the created order is a matter for celebration rather than complaint.²

The biblical vision of the good life is neither lavish nor austere. Rather, it is a mindset that sees abundance in the essential and the everyday: in a pool of water that has not dried up; in a pasture that is not overgrazed; in companionship during suffering. Self-sacrifice is not the goal of the Christian life, but it *is* a valuable practice because it trains us to recognize abundance. If you've spent a day fasting, a banana takes on the glamour of a hot fudge sundae. If you've biked or walked everywhere for six months, a car ride can be experienced as the luxury it really is. A recent psychological study supports these examples. The authors found that wealth blunted people's ability to savor life's goodness. Their research suggested that when resources are scarce, people spend more time appreciating what they do have.³

A healthy household requires a householder.

This would be stating the obvious in most cultures, but in North America, many of us have abdicated our position as household managers. We have allowed a scattered scrambling from fast food outlet to soccer practice to replace loving attention to the functioning of our homes. Manual labor and housework do not have the status they once did. Whatever one does at a computer is now considered much more important work than repairing a toaster or doing the laundry. While scanning descriptions of home economics programs offered by the few colleges that have not already dropped this major, I noticed that several were quick to assure the reader that this field was no longer about practical skills like baking brownies or darning socks. We can do without brownies, but people who have neither time nor practical skills to give to householding may as well not read sustainable living tip sheets.

Isn't *householder* a lovely word? It conjures up images of someone with their arms wrapped around the whole home: holding it together in an orderly fashion, holding it in prayer, holding sick children, cleaning the gutters and picking tomatoes. I was so taken with the word that I looked it up in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The first definition was as expected, but the second definition was . . . **God**. I can't recall our congregation ever praying to God the Great Householder, but apparently it was a common practice over the past millennium. John Calvin, for example, writing in the mid 1500s, describes God as "A most loving and carefull housholder, bicause he alwayes sent them rayne to prepare them foode."⁴ The metaphor aptly captures God's sustaining presence, overseeing both the human family and creation.

Indeed, God as household manager is a common biblical image if we look for it. Both the tending of animals and the tending of a guest at the table in Psalm 23 are forms of householding. God is the provider of food and drink throughout the Hebrew Bible; for the hungry

² Nick Spencer, R. S. White, and Virginia Vroblesky, *Christianity, Climate Change, and Sustainable Living* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009) 63.

³ Jordi Quoidbach, et. al. "Money Giveth, Money Taketh Away: The Dual Effect of Wealth on Happiness." *Association for Psychological Science*, XXX, 1-5, 2010.

⁴ Jean Calvin, *The Psalmes of David and others; with M. Iohn Caluins commentaries* (transl. Arthur Golding), 1st edition, 1571 (1 vol.) London: T. East and H. Middleton. Cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

slaves escaped from Egypt as well as the wild donkeys in Psalm 104. Margaret Kim Peterson in her book, *Keeping House*, pursues this theme in the New Testament:

[H]ouse keeping can play a part in the ancient Christian discipline of the imitation of Christ. In his earthly life, Jesus humbly embraced both life in the body and life in community. He allowed others to feed and shelter him and in turn concerned himself with the feeding and clothing and sheltering of others.⁵

Peterson also has an interesting take on Jesus' parable in Matthew 25 about sorting the sheep and the goats at the last judgment:

There is a tendency on the part of those of us who are well fed, clothed and housed to imagine that the needy people to whom Jesus refers in Matthew 25 are people we don't know—the sort of people who are served at homeless shelters... But housework is all about feeding and clothing and sheltering people who, in the absence of that daily work, would otherwise be hungry and ill-clad and ill-housed.⁶

Reclaiming housework as God-like and God-blessed work is a necessary prerequisite to retrofitting our homes and refining our diets.

Another defense of the art of householding comes from theologian Malinda Berry. Berry reads the Mennonite cookbook classic, *More with Less*, and its later companion volume, *Living More with Less*, as works of organic theology similar to Latin American liberation theology.⁷ She describes their author, Doris Janzen Longacre, as a theologian as well as a home economist. Longacre's second book includes many lifestyle stories organized around five household standards for daily living: do justice, learn from the world community, nurture people, cherish the created order and nonconform freely. Longacre mentored her community in the art of translating theological norms into concrete action and building bridges between the kitchen and the global community beyond it.⁸ This is what good householders do.

Economic, racial and cultural diversity enriches our communal vision of a healthy household.

Long before diversity was cool, the Christian tradition has been calling its members to envision rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, Ethiopian eunuch and Philippian businesswoman gathered around a common core despite their differences. The long view from the top of the archeological tell reminds us of the vast assortment of households from other times and places that have attempted to live out a Gospel of simple abundance. This diversity can be enriching. It also requires us to discern carefully rather than borrow others' solutions without reflecting on them.

⁵ Margaret Kim Peterson, *Keeping House: The Litany of Everyday Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

⁶ Peterson 3.

⁷ Malinda Elizabeth Berry, "The Gifts of an Extended Theological Table: World Community Cookbooks as Organic Theology," in Alain Epp Weaver and Robert Kreider, *A Table of Sharing: Mennonite Central Committee and the Expanding Networks of Mennonite Identity* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing, 2011) 288.

⁸ Berry, 293.

How to manage a household has always been high on the list of interests for people of faith. However, they have not always used the same language to talk about it, nor had identical goals. Consider these three terms from different time periods: *simple lifestyle*, *sustainable lifestyle*, *poverty*. *Simple lifestyle* is the term Mennonites (and many other people) have used over the past forty years. It suggests a life rooted in spiritual values, uncluttered by luxury, showiness or trivia. Living a *sustainable lifestyle* is a more recent concern and has a technical definition. *Sustainability* is a term borrowed from the fields of business and environmental science. It is focused on our biological systems' ability to provide for the present without diminishing the possibilities for future generations, ecologically, socially or financially.

Centuries earlier, *poverty*, as in "poverty, chastity and obedience" was the language in which Christians addressed lifestyle issues. The Rule of St. Benedict, which has governed many monasteries for over 1500 years, understands poverty as a tool that enables people to listen to God. In giving up the right to private property, monks and nuns learned to depend on God and their communities. Free from both material clutter and anxieties about basic needs, the monastic household could focus on listening to God's voice.⁹ One can imagine a lively dialog between households representing these three emphases, each with different practices and language.

Diversity becomes a problem when simple living "solutions" appropriate to one era, social class or culture become frozen in time or applied in other contexts where they don't make sense. At its best, Mennonite plain clothing was (and is) an attempt to live simply and free from the dictates of fashion. This interpretation of Christ's teachings has also descended into legalism and silliness when Christian evangelists made it into law and exported it to times and places where it wasn't authentic or even understood.

Environmental evangelists are capable of similar blunders. Excellent advice for people with power and wealth may make no sense to people from another economic location. Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *Flight Behavior*, describes an encounter between a tract-wielding environmentalist and a low-income mother from the Appalachian Mountains. Together, they examine the man's list of lifestyle suggestions.

"Reduce the amount of meat in your diet," he says.

"I'm trying to increase the amount of meat in my kids' diet. Box macaroni and cheese only goes so far," she says.

"Avoid flying," he says.

"I've never flown in my life," she says.

"Take your own carry-out container to restaurants."

"I haven't been to a restaurant in two years."

⁹ Daniel J. Ward, O.S.B. "[Poverty: A Way of Listening](#)." *Monastics: Life and Law: Reflections of a Benedictine Canonist*. American Benedictine Academy, 1998.

Obviously, this man's brochure was not pitched to a family living in poverty.

The different approaches that congregations take to buildings highlights the importance of our racial and cultural contexts. Several congregations within Mennonite Creation Care Network do not own a building and see this as good economic and environmental stewardship. Among them are First Mennonite Church of San Francisco which rents from a Jewish synagogue and Pilgrims Mennonite in Akron, Pa., which makes use of Mennonite Central Committee buildings. I can also recall meeting an African American pastor with an entirely different perspective. Without a building, an African American congregation wasn't a congregation, he said, and explained the history behind his statement. Often, a church building was the first property that former slaves were able to own. Such a building was a symbol of achievement and dignity. Congregants took pride in pooling their resources to purchase a building. They would feel homeless without one, he asserted.

We are all held within the embrace of God the great householder who wills abundant life for us. We are all called to craft Christ-centered households. No one is excused from thinking through the environmental challenges that face our planet, but neither will we all come to the same conclusions. Let us be willing to challenge each other without making judgments. Let us be a thoughtful and articulate people, able to explain our choices. Let us delight in the diversity of expressions that result.

Discussion Questions

Key Ideas

1. What do you most want out of life? Where do Psalm 23 and the main points of the essay intersect with what you hope for?
2. What is your history with a faith-based emphasis on a simple lifestyle? Have you experienced it as good news, or as something else? What successes and failures have you and your household had in attempting to live sustainably?
3. Can you think of an action your household could take for the sake of creation that would be a source of greater wellbeing rather than a sacrifice? What might that be?
4. Do you consider yourself a "householder?" Does your household have adequate time and attention to address sustainable living concerns such as food, water and energy consumption? If so, are there other barriers that prevent you from making environmentally friendly changes that you would like to make? Help each other identify ways to overcome these barriers.
5. What encounters have you had with people from other races, classes or cultures whose understanding of the good life was different than yours? Were you able to discuss your differences? How might ideas from diverse backgrounds enrich your understanding?

Supplementary Questions:

6. What differences do you imagine when you picture the practices of three households that emphasize *simplicity*, *sustainability* and *poverty*, respectively? Does one appeal to you more than the others?
7. Note that Appendix 1 includes a resource sheet on food for discussion at home. You could discuss it as a group if you wished. See also Place Question #2.
8. What do you make of the fact that the 23rd Psalm portrays God as a "farmer?" What kind of relationship between land, animals and people is described?
9. Historically, Mennonites have been a farming people, sought after for their ability to bring forth food from marginal land. What does this heritage add to the discussion surrounding food? Does your household produce food or other goods as well as consume them?

Knowing Your Place

Place Questions

1. Where does your drinking water come from? Where does your wastewater go and how is it treated?
2. Where does food come from in your community? What foods are grown within your circles? Do they feed the local population or go elsewhere?
3. How can you support the farmers in your region who are doing the best job of caring for their land and animals? Where can you buy their food?

Practices

Spiritual Practices

1. **Seek abundance:** Find a way to fast this week from your usual level of consumption. This could include skipping a meal, giving up meat, making your Sabbath a carbon-free day, biking whenever possible or not entering a store. What simple pleasures did you discover instead?

2. **Pay attention to water:** Give thanks for each cup of water you drink this week. Pray for those whose rivers are dried up, whose aquifers are depleted, who have no well.
3. **Begin a gratitude journal:** Each day, write about the things you are thankful for. You may find you have a lot to say, even on bad days.
4. **Bible study:** Apply the Ecological Lens Questions to Psalm 23 or the related scriptures listed.

Household Practices

1. **Discuss your food choices** with your household using the food resource sheet provided for this session. In what way is God calling you to practice your faith at the table?
2. **Calculate your carbon footprint.** If you did not already do this during Session 6, try it now. See the handout, *Carbon Footprints*, on page 6-11.
3. **Become aware of what you consume:** For one week, keep a list of everything that you purchase. How did each item enrich your life? Put a star by items that do not fit your values. How might you better align your consumption with your understanding of the good life?

Additional Resources

Lifestyle Broadly Speaking

[Average American Consumes 50,000 Pounds of Raw Material Annually](#)

This brief article explains what is meant by a material footprint and how our footprints could possibly be so large.

[Blessed Earth Tip Sheets](#)

Blessed Earth is an educational nonprofit that inspires and equips people of faith to become better stewards of the earth. Matthew and Nancy Sleeth are the founders. Their concise and attractive tip sheets cover food, water, green cleaning, lawns and gardens, vacations and more.

Hayes, Shannon. *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture*. Richmondville, NY: Left to Write Press, 2010.

This book is about homemaking as a positive choice centered on family and community. Hayes, who writes from a sustainable farm in New York, emphasizes that households can produce goods as well as consume them.

Longenecker, Doris Janzen with Valerie Weaver, ed. *Living More with Less, 30th Anniversary Edition*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010.

This revision of a Mennonite classic advocates for a five-part “household code”: do justice, learn from the world community, nurture people, cherish the natural order, nonconform freely. Chapters on clothing, gardening, food, homes, transportation, and so on, share practical tips and stories. A [free study guide](#) is available from MennoMedia.

Peterson, Margaret Kim. *Keeping House: The Litany of Everyday Life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

Valuing housework as important work is a necessary prerequisite to living sustainably. “What’s Christian about housework?” Peterson asks and finds some profound answers.

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 reduce our impacts.

[The Short List: The Most Effective Actions U.S. Households Can Take To Curb Climate Change](#), by Gerald T. Gardner and Paul C. Stern

Households account for about 38% of U.S. carbon emissions so conservation-minded householders *can* make a difference. This is a detailed article, but you can zoom quickly to the charts to see which actions matter most.

Food

Significant leaders in the movement toward sustainable food and farming include Will Allen, Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, Joel Salatin, Frances Moore Lappé and Anna Lappé.

Theologians or biblical scholars who are known for their work on food include Andy Alexis-Baker, Wendell Berry, Shannon Jung, Angel Mendez- Montoya, Norman Wirzba.

The Internet contains a vast sea of resources on sustainable farming and eating. The sources below are ones that have Mennonite ties.

Kaufman, Roy. *Healing God’s Earth: Rural Community in the Context of Urban Civilization*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013.

While not specifically about farming, this book grows out of Kaufman’s long career as a pastor in rural communities. It is a biblical and theological look at what it means to be a community in the face of a corrosive dominant culture.

[Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College](#)

This 1,189-acre nature preserve’s vision of environmental education includes the [Merry Lea Sustainable Farm](#) and an [Agroecology Summer Intensive](#) where undergraduates come to learn

to farm in harmony with the surrounding ecosystems. This is where much of the *Every Creature Singing* curriculum was written. Come visit our farm and browse our ten fat shelves of books on everything from genetic engineering to building chicken coops.

Schrock, Jennifer Halteman. [Just Eating: Practicing Our Faith at the Table](#). Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Hunger Program, 2004.

The *Just Eating* curriculum brings together hunger, health, the environment and the communal and sacred aspects of food, all in one seven-week study. A middle school version is also available.

[Practical Farmers of Iowa](#), [The Urban Farmer](#), [Growing Power](#) and [The Lean Farm](#) by Ben Hartman offer support to those serious about growing food.

Lind, Mary Beth and Cathleen Hockman-Wert. *Simply in Season*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005.

The authors emphasize fresh, local food and arrange recipes according to when it is in season.

York, Tripp and Andy Alexis-Baker. *A Faith Embracing All Creatures: Addressing Commonly Asked Questions About Christian Care for Animals*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012.

This collection of essays looks at our relationship with animals and challenges our comfortable assumptions about eating meat.

Fossil Fuels

Ball, Jeffrey. [“Six Products, Six Carbon Footprints.”](#) *The Wall Street Journal*, 10/6, 2008.

Consumer goods have carbon footprints too. Interestingly, the largest part of the carbon footprint of many products does not come from manufacturing or shipping, but is generated during consumer use.

[Interfaith Power and Light](#)

This organization helps congregations respond to climate change. They promote advocacy, energy conservation and renewable energy. Join their climate change preach-in, pursue an energy grant through the [Cool Congregations Challenge](#) or check out their many resources.

[Task of the Month](#) is a program for reducing household energy use.

The handout, [About Carbon Footprints](#) in Appendix 1 has advice on lifestyle changes.

Water

The [Grace Communications Foundation](#) looks at the ways water, food and energy are interrelated. Learn about water footprints on their water page.

[Home Water Works](#) helps you calculate how much water you use and how you could save.

Session 11: Creating Accountable Communities

Knowing Your Faith

Jump to: [Discussion Questions](#)

[Knowing Your Place](#)

[Practices](#)

[Resources](#)

Scripture: Acts 2, especially verses 1-11 and 41-47

Related Texts: Acts 4:32-37, Matthew 25:31-46

Suggested Ecological Lens Questions: Try B and E with Acts 2:41-47.

Each autumn, Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College hosts a [Sustainability Leadership Semester](#). Undergraduates live and study together at this 1200-acre nature center in Wolf Lake, Ind. In addition to coursework, they prepare their own meals using food from the farm on the property and try out sustainable practices related to food, water, energy and shelter. While students arrive expecting to learn ways they as *individuals* can live more sustainable lives, they leave with the understanding that sustainable living is a *communal endeavor*. This shift in thinking is one that churches may need to work at as well.

Churchgoers ought to be old hands at communal endeavors. Christian churches are unique communities bound together in love and empowered by the Holy Spirit. As William Willimon has put it in his commentary on the book of Acts:

The most eloquent testimony to the reality of the resurrection is not an empty tomb or a well-orchestrated pageant on Easter Sunday, but rather a group of people whose life together is so radically different, so completely changed from the way the world builds a community, that there can be no explanation other than that something decisive has happened in history.¹

Sadly, not all of us are as steeped in the reality of the resurrection as we wish. Neither are our one-hour-a-week communities as intimate and vibrant as we might desire.

Many congregations are not supportive places for lifestyle transformation. Questions of consumption simply don't come up in church or are avoided for the sake of unity. I recall meeting a man who was trying to decide if his family needed to buy a van. He found that fellow church members were reluctant to discuss this major purchase with him. They regarded vehicles as a personal matter and were not comfortable giving counsel on a lifestyle issue. Our faith heritage challenges this reticence. Let's consider what our central ritual—sharing communion—might have to say to us about creating accountable communities.

¹ William Willimon, *Acts*, in the series, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988) 51.

Spirited Tables

It seems a tame enough ritual. We recite a few words, say a prayer, take a bite of bread and sip on grape juice in the safe confines of our church sanctuaries. Usually we are with people a lot like us. But if we really understood what we were commemorating when we accept this token meal, our governments would be bugging our worship services. Taking communion is a subversive, Spirit-inspired act of defiance against the dominant world order and its economic structures. It announces that radical sharing across lines of race, class and gender are possible and that when we do that, Jesus Christ is present among us in a powerful way.

Most Christians would trace the origins of our communion ritual to Jesus' request that his followers "do this in remembrance of me" at the last supper.² Why was that memory important to early believers? Surely it was reinforced by the early Church's experiences of worship and table fellowship following Pentecost. These too are "communion stories." Given the wind and the flame, it is easy to imagine that Pentecost was an inner mystical experience. It may have been that, but the story also describes Pentecost as an outpouring that enabled radical new ways of sharing resources. Just after Peter's impassioned altar call concludes in Acts 2:41, we hear about sharing, communal meals and redistribution of wealth. On either side of the clause, "bore witness to the resurrection" in 4:33, we find that believers are relinquishing possessions so that no one is in need.³

In biblical times, 90% of people lived at a subsistence level. While Acts does mention sales of land, food was the resource people were most likely to be able to share. Thus, it makes sense that the common life, breaking bread and prayer are all mentioned together in 2:42. The Lord's Supper that the early church observed was a full meal, not a token bite of bread. It was a way of feeding everyone physically as well as spiritually. The early church remembered Jesus by pooling my lentils and your sheep bone; her loaf of bread and his olive oil. According to Acts, this is what happens when the Holy Spirit blows: people who don't speak the same language manage to understand each other, and everyone has enough to eat. This is the vision we commemorate every time we take communion.

How might we reclaim our birthright as people of wind, flame and justice? Can we include birds, insects, trees and land in our tally of who needs food and drink? Below, we'll look at more recent ways people have formed communities in order to honor the needs of all people and the earth. The first two are Christian; the last two speak secular language and offer interesting possibilities for cross-fertilization. If we hope to share good news or collaborate with neighbors beyond the walls of our congregations, we may need to be bilingual.

² What does Jesus intend us to remember when we break bread together? See [The Meals of Jesus: Table Fellowship in the Gospels](#), by Mark Moore. He provides a list of table fellowship incidents in the Gospels and a helpful one-page commentary.

³ Biblical interpreters have often dismissed the communal life described in Acts as temporary, idealistic and romanticized. For an alternate interpretation, see Reta Finger's *Of Widows and Meals*, listed under resources below. According to Finger, the sharing practices described in the early chapters of Acts were widespread, long-lived and continue to be relevant today.

New Monasticism

New Monasticism is a movement of intentional communities within Protestantism that began in the early 2000s. Like traditional monks and nuns, these laypeople nurture a common life together. They commit to spiritual disciplines, live among the poor, practice hospitality to the stranger, care for the creation around them and share economic resources. In 2004, a number of intentional communities gathered and agreed on the [12 marks of new monasticism](#). This list now defines the movement much as the Rule of St. Benedict does for Benedictine monasteries.

Shane Claiborne of the [Simple Way Community](#) in Philadelphia, Pa., is one spokesperson for new monasticism. [The Jeremiah Community](#) in Toronto is another group. We may not be free to pick up and relocate to one of these inspiring communities, but most of the practices that make them who they are can happen anywhere. A small group within a more traditional congregation might covenant to embrace elements of the 12 marks or the more specific [Rule of Life](#) described on The Jeremiah Community's website. Or a group could write its own rule.

• The Sevenfold Covenant

Ched Myers of [Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries](#), Oak View, CA, developed this model in the mid-2000s to help people connect their faith with personal and political issues of economic justice. The covenant includes seven areas:

- surplus capital
- debt
- giving
- environment and green living
- consumption
- solidarity
- work and Sabbath

Group participants agree to work on one thing in each of the seven categories in an honest and transparent way. Each household begins wherever it is, without judgment and takes steps that may be small or large. Myers reports that most participants "experienced palpable relief in breaking the social taboos that keep us silent about money, class and lifestyle." They became less anxious about their stuck places and more able to imagine practical alternatives. One tangible outcome from the 45 households that piloted the covenant involved savings. Collectively, they moved 2.75 million dollars into socially responsible investing.⁴ Matthew Colwell's *Sabbath Economics: Household Practices*, tells stories about people working through the Sevenfold Covenant and provides discussion questions. Again, this model of community could work anywhere, with anyone willing to submit to the process.

Transition Town Movement

The [Transition Town Movement](#) is a network of local communities working to:

- build resilience in response to peak oil,
- reduce carbon emissions in response to climate change, and
- strengthen local economies.

⁴ Matthew Colwell, *Sabbath Economics: Household Practices* (Washington, DC: Church of the Saviour, 2009) 13-14.

The movement began in Ireland in 2005 when a town adopted an energy descent plan. It has since spread to over 1,000 towns in 44 countries. The U.S. has about 150 official sites, with many other locations in various stages of organizing.

Transition town planners assume that life beyond fossil fuels is inevitable and so is climate change. Rather than waiting for the government to act, these communities are organizing for change on their own from the bottom up. They believe that by planning for this future at the local level, we can both weather the coming crises and build a more fulfilling, connected and less harried way of life.

Each transition town is unique to its locale. Our transition movement in Goshen, Indiana, is involved with food issues. For example, it owns a community cider press and sponsored apple gleanings last fall, when many suburbanites with apple trees had bumper crops they couldn't use. It also helps different groups to network together. Transition towns in other communities have developed local currencies or sponsored "re-skilling" workshops for people who no longer know how to cook, build or grow things.

The practical, down-to-earth concerns of the transition town movement can engage a wide variety of people. This movement could provide a much-needed model of community engagement for churches that have stayed focused within their four walls. Alternately, those within churches may have much to offer the transition town movement. Many still *do* know how to cook, build and grow things and can draw on a rich communal heritage that secular people may lack.

Addiction work and 12-step groups

If you consume a substance or pursue a habit against your self-interest and you can't stop, you are an addict. That is a standard definition from the field of addictions, and it applies to a lot more of us than care to admit it. Most of us think of drugs and alcohol or possibly gambling or pornography when we think of addictions. Nevertheless, our society's use of fossil fuels and its other consumptive habits might fall in that category as well.

Do insights from chemical addictions transfer to our compulsion to use more than our fair share of resources? Can we wean ourselves from a high carbon lifestyle through an addictions group in the same way that a compulsive eater might benefit from Overeaters Anonymous? Some people think so. The *Transition Town Manual* mentions addiction, and an emerging field called neuroconservation attempts to apply brain research in areas like addiction to our need to address climate change. For example, the ability to overcome an immediate impulse in exchange for a later, better reward is one feature being studied in relation to both addiction and sustainable lifestyles.⁵

Addicts at the beginning of a 12-step program admit they are powerless over their addictions and throw themselves on the mercy of God or a Higher Power as they understand it. They then move toward recognizing the harm they have caused and making amends. Eventually, they

⁵ Elizabeth Jeffries, "[Carbon Fix](#)," *Nature Climate Change*, 3, 765 (2013).

commit to helping others with similar problems. If we applied theological language to the 12-step experience, we might use words like humility, sin, repentance, confession and grace.

A church seeking to address sustainable lifestyle issues could learn a lot from addiction recovery programs and the addicts in their midst. One part of the process that seems particularly compatible with overconsumption of fossil fuels is the “fearless moral inventory” that addicts must face, recognizing the ways their habits have caused harm. Secondly, community life would deepen and take on new meaning if we realized that we are powerless to change without the help of the body of Christ. Recovering addicts know that the community aspect of 12-step programs is essential. For new habits to stick even under stress and temptation, people need to be part of a supportive community that believes change is possible. Without the help of a group to reinforce belief, it is too easy to despair.⁶ Recovering addicts sometimes say that their addiction groups are the most intimate and profound experiences of their lives. Such groups could teach us the freedom to face our lifestyle failings and be honest about them. They could also show us the value of genuine community based on mutual support and mutual need.

Intimacy is a thread running between the communal life described in Acts and the contemporary models of community described above. Caring for our congregations, our neighbors and our watersheds may require more intimacy than many of us are used to. A small thing like gleaning apples with strangers is a low cost form of connection that many would welcome. Committing to other practices described above would require more time and intensity. Is this a draw or a sacrifice for 21st century Americans? Even eating together on a regular basis would cramp many people’s busy lifestyles. Perhaps it is as Jesus said: choosing his way requires letting some things go and leaving some people behind. There is a price to pay, but also much to gain.

⁶ Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. (New York, NY: Random House, 2012) 92.

Discussion Questions

Key ideas

1. Is your congregation a supportive place for lifestyle transformation? If so, what makes it that way? If not, how could you work toward simpler and more sustainable lifestyles together?
2. The essay suggests that the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit is a necessary piece of a transformed community life. What helps or hinders your connection with God?
3. The essay also suggests that intimacy with fellow congregants is a necessary piece of a transformed community life. What helps or hinders your intimacy with your congregation?
4. Which of the models of community mentioned in the essay are familiar to you? What other groups within your region or your congregation call people to sustainable lifestyles or have the potential to do so?
5. Where is the balance between honoring diversity and challenging each other to consider how much is enough? How can the diversity within your congregation be an opportunity as well as a tension? What are healthy ways to discuss our different approaches to lifestyle issues?

Supplementary Questions

6. How would you help the man mentioned on page 11-1 discern whether to buy a van if he were in your congregation?
7. How can your congregation practice sharing of goods and services? What do you have to share and how could you share these things?
8. How can your congregation be part of ensuring that people within your map circles have clean water, clean air, healthy food systems and quality shelter? What about future people?
9. What structures can you build into your congregation so that lifestyle issues remain in the foreground? For example:
 - Include a lifestyle challenge in a membership covenant.
 - Plan Christian education classes so that topics such as food, water, energy and various forms of creation care are addressed on a regular basis.
 - Hold a yearly retreat where members work on lifestyle issues.
10. Do you think “addiction” is a helpful way to think about North American consumption of fossil fuels and other goods? In what ways does the definition fit or not fit? In what ways does the 12-step “cure” fit?

Knowing Your Place

Place Questions

1. What native peoples originally inhabited your region? What waves of immigrants followed and when did they arrive? How did they relate to the land? Are remnants of these groups still present?
2. What natural resources or community resources do members within your congregation share? How can the relationships you already have with each other be an asset in caring for these natural resources?

Practices

Spiritual Practices

1. **Invite input** from a few members of your congregation on a financial decision you might normally make on your own.
2. **Start a small group** that draws on one of the models of community described in the essay. Or challenge existing small groups within your congregation to wrestle with the issues touched on in sessions 9-12 of this curriculum.
3. **Agape meals:** Sharing food is a sacred act. Find new ways to eat together that include people who usually eat alone or people who have trouble keeping food on the table. Work through the online resource, [The Meals of Jesus: Table Fellowship in the Gospels](#), mentioned in footnote 2. How can an Agape meal help you to remember Jesus and celebrate the Holy Spirit present among you?
4. **“No needy among them”:** Discern non-human need in your community. What about birds that are losing their habitat? Roadsides infested with plastic trash? Polluted water? Pray for the need that God reveals to you, both personally and within your worship services. Seek guidance for action.

Household Practices

All of these practices refer to your congregational “household.”

1. **Assess Your Church:** Mennonite Creation Care Network offers a [Greener Congregation Score Sheet](#) to help congregations think systematically about their practices. Questions cover a variety of categories, from buildings to worship. Work through one or more

questions on the score sheet. Discussion guides for each category are also available.

2. **Set up a borrowing system** that allows people to indicate what items they are willing to share and under what circumstances. Categories could include tools, housewares, vehicles, labor, skills, childcare, items for worship visuals. You could also draft a covenant that people sign when they borrow something.
3. **Set up systems for recycling** or evaluate the ones you do have. Does everyone know about your paper bins? Is there a need to provide for waste that is difficult or inconvenient to recycle, such as batteries⁷ and old electronics. Research how the items are recycled to make sure they are recycled safely. Announce your county's monthly hazardous waste collection, or have one person drive a load to save everyone making a trip.
4. **Glean ideas from others:** Visit MCCN's [stories about churches page](#) for stories about how other congregations are working together to care for creation.

Additional Resources

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

This book relates to the place question about former Native American communities. This challenging collection of essays reveals an emerging dialog between Native voices and settler voices.

Colwell, Matthew. *Sabbath Economics: Household Practices*. Washington, DC: Church of the Saviour, 2009.

Myers, Ched. *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*. Washington, DC: Church of the Saviour, 2001.

These companion books from Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries lay the groundwork for an economics grounded in the Sabbath and the biblical Jubilee. Colwell tells stories about people working through the [Sevenfold Covenant](#) described in this session's essay.

Finger, Reta Halteman. *Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.

Finger is skeptical of the long tradition that has dismissed the communal life described in Acts as temporary, idealistic and romanticized. She examines the sociological background of the time and describes how food and meals functioned in the Ancient Near East. According to

⁷ In most locations, you will need to pay to get rid of alkaline batteries because it is not cost-effective to recycle them for free. [Battery Solutions](#) is one company that does this.

Finger, the sharing practices described in the early chapters of Acts were widespread, long-lived and continue to be relevant today. See pp. 276-286 for a summary of the book.

**Johnstone, Chris. [“Insights from Addictions Recovery Applied to Climate Change.”](#)
Climate Code Red. N.p., January 29, 2012.**

An addictions specialist makes connections between his work in health care and the dangers of climate change. He describes motivational interviewing. This is a technique where leaders help people hear themselves voicing their own concerns rather than dispensing advice.

[Mennonite Creation Care Network](#) (MCCN)

Read stories about congregations caring for creation in various ways. Find a score sheet to help your congregation evaluate creation care steps so far and set a direction for the future.

Moore, Mark. [The Meals of Jesus: Table Fellowship in the Gospels.](#)

This online chart catalogs the various forms of table fellowship described in the Gospels and what they might mean. Pastors, you’ve got a sermon series here.

[New Monasticism](#)

A web of intentional communities has attracted 20-somethings to follow Jesus by living in community among the poor. [The Jeremiah Community](#) and the rule of life they follow is one example.

[Transition Town Movement](#)

Learn about this shift toward local resources and less fossil fuels.

[The Twelve Steps for Freedom From Addictive Behaviors.](#)

Review the 12 steps and find many other resources related to addiction at this site.

Willimon, William. *Acts, in the series, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.* Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988.

A trustworthy and readable commentary on the Acts texts used here.

Session 12: A Spirituality That Sustains

Knowing Your Faith

Jump to: [Discussion Questions](#)

[Knowing Your Place](#)

[Practices](#)

[Resources](#)

Scripture: Revelation 5

Related Texts: Ephesians 3:14-21, I Corinthians 13:13

Suggested Eco-Lens Questions: Try C and E with Revelation 5.

Worship undergirds our work on behalf of creation.

- In worship, we name our ultimate allegiance.
- In worship, we tell stories that challenge the violence and despair we encounter elsewhere.
- In worship, we remember who we are and how we are to live.
- In worship, an unlikely assortment of human beings becomes the body of Christ.¹

Worship that tells the truth about God's faithfulness to all of creation sustains our hope and empowers our actions. It is one of the unique gifts the Church has to offer its struggling planet.

The Source of Our Hope

The *Every Creature Singing* curriculum was named for a vision. It is a vision that came to an exiled and persecuted early Christian named John, and it is the hope underlying all of our work. Caught up in the Spirit, John witnesses what is ultimately real: a world where God is sovereign and the One worthy to take charge of all of history is revealed.

Revelation is a book that highlights what is of ultimate worth. *Worthy* is an important word in Revelation 5. It occurs twice as the narrative describes the quest for someone worthy to open the scroll of history, and it appears again in the songs of praise when the worthy one is found. Revelation is also about worship. In fact, the word, *worship*, comes from the Middle English word, *worth-ship*, which refers to putting a price on something. To *worship* is to ascribe worth to something.²

After eleven weeks of scrupulous attention to our own regions, Revelation 5 comes at us like a punch in the gut. We've been seeking God *within* creation and our own neighborhoods these last three months, but here in Revelation, we meet God *beyond* creation: timeless, cosmic and

¹ Summarized from John Roth, *Practices: Mennonite Worship and Witness*. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009). See especially pp. 61 to 78.

² Benjamin M. Stewart, *A Watered Garden: Christian Worship and Earth's Ecology*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2011) 9-10.

universal. Using a throne to represent God's sovereignty, John confronts us with the source, the center, the hope of the whole universe.

The transcendent God in this vision is still intimately tied to the world of flesh. Four living creatures who represent all of creation³ surround the One seated on the throne and a rainbow wraps around them (4:3). This rainbow alludes to the only other rainbow in the Bible—the rainbow in Genesis 9. There, God makes a covenant with all living things and promises to bear with creation no matter what happens.

The Worthy One: Lamb and Root

Revelation 5 provides us with vivid images for Christ as well. In verses 1-7, some *worthy* being is sought to open the scroll that describes God's purposes for the world. The *Lion* of Judah, The *Root* of David is announced as the deserving conqueror, but a lion never appears. In its place, John sees a slaughtered lamb. Note that the imagery used here to describe Christ is not human; it is animal and vegetable. These metaphors from nature remind us that God is an "Other;" a being outside of human categories like male and female. Nature metaphors also lend dignity to the parts of creation that serve as windows to the divine. If a lamb can represent Christ, we might want to re-think how we treat sheep and other livestock. If a root tells us something about ultimate worth, we might approach plants with the sense of awe they deserve.

The lamb is the dominant image for Christ in the book of Revelation, appearing 28 times. Since the diminutive form of the Greek word is used, we could call it a "little lambkin." Despite its scars, this lamb has seven horns and seven eyes, denoting complete power and insight. In the interests of time, we will leave Christ the Lamb to the many able commentators who have already explored this image⁴ and instead consider what Christ the Root has to offer us in an age of ecological despair.

Twice in Revelation—here and in the concluding finale in 22:16—Jesus is called the Root of David. Usually, we hear the Messianic mention of David (which doesn't mean much to contemporary Gentiles) and never bother to explore this intriguing Christological metaphor involving roots. Given the rural context, it is not surprising that biblical writers used agricultural imagery. They often spoke of their nation as a plant, depicting goodness as that which is rooted and enduring. In Jeremiah 17:7-8, those who trust in God are said to be "like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream." Psalm 1 is similar. A hopeful prophecy found in Isaiah 27:6 says,

In days to come, Jacob shall take root,
 Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots,
 and fill the whole world with fruit.

Isaiah 37:31 adds the delightful phrase, "take root downwards, and bear fruit upwards." The words, *lion*, *lamb* and *root* in Revelation 5 likely allude to the "peaceable kingdom" vision in Isaiah 11, which also uses all three of these images. There, the Messiah is a new sprout on the

³ John R. Yeatts, *Revelation, Believer's Church Bible Commentary* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003).

⁴ Ted Grimsrud, J. Nelson Kraybill, Barbara Rossing and John Yeatts are just a few of the authors that deal with the lamb in the book of Revelation.

old root. No doubt Jesus also imagined a well-rooted plant when he said, “I am the vine,” in John 15!

God’s judgment is sometimes described as an uprooting. “The wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it,” Proverbs 2:22 says. I Kings 14:15 warns that God “will root up Israel out of this good land,” because of idolatry. Jesus’ parable about the sower follows suit with a description of seedlings growing in stony soil, soon to wither because they had only shallow roots.

Jesus the root is a powerful image for those who prefer outdoor learning to scripture citations. Roots are a plant’s source of life. Think of online nurseries: The dreary-looking lumps of vegetable matter that they mail out look disappointing, but put the roots in the ground, and they are soon flourishing and green. Think of crabgrass: Unless you extract every single root, it isn’t even discouraged, let alone eradicated. Think of prairie restorations: In the Eastern U.S., this ecosystem is fire-dependent and must be burned periodically to keep out woody matter. Burn a prairie and within a week, the charred ground is dotted with green and the grasses are back at it, drawing on their deep root systems five, ten, twenty feet below ground.

A root is an anchor. It keeps the plant in place no matter the weather. Even during a hurricane, relatively few trees are felled because their roots are made to withstand this stress. Roots also anchor the soil. We live in a time when we have the sad opportunity to become experts on deforestation. Avalanches are the most obvious of the grim consequences of uprooted plants and soil erosion. The loss of roots causes extinctions, disrupts the water cycle and drives climate change.

A root is in intimate contact with the local soil. When some hard-working researchers managed to pry the roots of a single ryegrass plant free from the soil it embraced, they measured 400 miles of roots tangled within 20 cubic feet of dirt.⁵ This connection gives roots the magic capacity to draw nutrients from the surrounding soil and turn them into leaves, flowers and fruit.

Christ the root is the indestructible source of life and anchor for the Church, embracing the earth and attuned to every source of nourishment in the soil. What a fitting metaphor for those engaged in watershed discipleship! Like the lamb that bears the marks of violence, Christ the Root suggests that God’s method of conquering is humble. The way to life is through connection with the soil. It is about life preserved down in the dark places. Fire, drought, pesticides and hurricanes may come, but the root will always re-sprout.

Our Fellow Worshipers

When the lamb makes its first appearance in Revelation 5, three groups of worshippers are there to celebrate its victory. First is the divine court, including the four living creatures. Next, billions of angels join them.⁶ A few verses later, John says,

⁵ Stern 65.

⁶ The original text uses the largest numbers that the Greek language could express.

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing . . . (5:13a)

Allow your imagination to play with this bold vision. What would it be like to hear **every creature singing**? While we could say that creation “sings” just by being itself, I like to imagine that a new capacity for song emerges at some point in the future, or that we develop ears that can hear the song. What would a mushroom sound like? Do they provide a grunty bass undertone, or are mushroom voices mellow and sweet? I think of the bird songs I know, and how pleasant it is to hear that their owners have returned in the spring, even if I can’t see them. I think of the more skilled birders I know who can sort out vireo songs in the treetops, while I hear only the dissonant chatter of many birds. What if we all had ears like that only *better*?

The author of Revelation is not the only person to envision every creature singing. Lawrence Hart, a Mennonite pastor and Cheyenne peace chief, says that Native American people understand the earth as the Creator’s song made visible.⁷ Anabaptist Bestiary, a contemporary music group under the direction of theologian Trevor Bechtel, endeavors to hear and share the voices of other creatures singing. The group writes and performs songs that speak in the voice of animals. While I was writing this curriculum, I listened almost daily to Anabaptist Bestiary’s interpretation of what bees or sloths or beavers or other animals might say to us if they could speak.

The 20th century British author, C.S. Lewis, gives us a very vivid picture of creation as song in his Narnia novels for children. The Christ figure in the series is a great lion who calls Narnia into being by singing. “There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was, beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise . . . ever heard,” Lewis writes. As the Narnian creation continues, the Creator’s voice is joined by the “cold tingling, silvery voices” of stars. Later the creator’s song changes and becomes more melodic and wilder. The earth responds and begins to swell and boil, and out of the humps and bumps come animals of every size and shape, embodying the song of their creator.⁸

Joining the Song

In Revelation, human beings are not caretakers of creation; here we are fellow worshippers and tardy ones at that. The vast, human choir does not come in until two chapters later in Revelation 7. We are neither the star singers nor the saviors; we are joining a song already in progress, called, “Worthy is the Lamb.”

In our weekly worship services, we too sing, “Worthy is the Lamb.” We ascribe worth to an itinerant healer and teacher who hiked a Palestinian backwater of the Roman Empire. We claim his sword-less mission, even though it ended in death. And every spring, as the trees are

⁷ Chief Lawrence Hart, “The Earth is a Song Made Visible: A Cheyenne Christian Perspective.” In *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice and Life Together*, Steve Heinrichs, ed. (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2013) 160-161.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew*, (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1955) 93-106.

setting buds and the daffodils are piercing the dead leaves on their way toward the sun, we tell shocking stories about resurrection.

Dare we also say, "Worthy is that bicycle I rode while another skyscraper rose in Dubai and the U.S. Congress fainted at the thought of carbon taxes?" Or, "Worthy is our cheerful little rain barrel in a sea of asphalt." Or what about, "Worthy are the tears we cried and the laments we sang as the bulldozers tore up the forest to lay an oil pipeline?" Are these things also worthy? Our story suggests that they are.

N.T. Wright, in his book *Surprised by Hope*, says we are all like stone masons, chiseling away at sculptures or towers or turrets that will only reveal their full beauty years in the future, when the cathedral is complete. In that grand building, no bit of goodness or justice or beauty will be left out or wasted.⁹ Whether we are cleaning up rivers or teaching children to recycle; whether we are fighting ecological injustice or planting trees, whether we are researching threatened species or simply cherishing every sunset, let's hope he's right. And let's keep singing while we work.

Discussion Questions

Key Ideas

1. **What sustains you?** What keeps you from lapsing into despair?
2. **How does change happen?** What turns fuzzy good intentions into clean water, fresh air and healthy land? Is it education? Legislation? Careful attention to habits? The vision provided by your congregation's worship? Or something else?
3. **Christ and creation:** At this point, how do you see non-human creation fitting into the good news of Jesus Christ? Has it changed since you last discussed this in session 2? What do images from Revelation add for you?
4. **Worshipping with creation:** How can your worship reflect God's blessing of all creation and creation's responsive praise? Discuss the worship ideas under Household Practices. Which suggestions would work in your context?

Supplementary Questions

5. **Habits:** What habits, spiritual or practical, sustain faithful earth keeping? What habits or practices threaten it?
6. **God in your watershed versus God enthroned:** How do you balance the immanence and transcendence of God? Which one is dominant in your theology? How might strengthening one or the other empower you to be a better protector of creation?

⁹ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008) 209-210.

7. **Non-human metaphors for the Trinity:** Does your prayer and worship life include nature images for God such as lamb, rock, wind, and mother bird? Which ones are meaningful to you? What might these add if you don't normally use them?
8. **Christ as animal:** Some of the meaning that a slaughtered lamb had for Jewish people is lost on us today. If you were going to describe Christ as an animal found in your region, what animal would you choose? Why? How might you work with this idea in your worship?
9. **Christ as root:** If you were going to imagine Christ as the root of a plant from your region, what plant would you choose? Why? Is there a way this plant can play a role in your worship?

Knowing Your Place

Place Questions

1. What soil types are common in your community? What kinds of plants grow best in these soil types? What "root" issues do you notice within your area of study?
2. What does it mean to be rooted in this community? What bonds people to this particular locale? How has this place shaped your relationship with God?
3. What places within your area of study need a sustained commitment? How might Christ the Root provide that?

Practices

Spiritual Practices

1. **Review spiritual practices you tried.** Decide which practices you want to hold onto in the future. What do you need to do to make that happen?
2. **Listen for the sound of creatures singing.** Spend time outside noticing the songs of birds, frogs, insects, wind in trees or other sounds of creation. Offer your own prayers along with these sounds. If there is a naturalist in your congregation and the season permits, have this person lead a listening hike. He or she can help you identify the voices you may hear.

3. **Pray for your congregation's roots:** Note that Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-20 is suggested as an additional text. Here, Paul speaks of being rooted and grounded in love. Pray his prayer for your congregation.

Paul also calls God "the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name." List some of the human surnames in your church directory. With the help of a field guide, list the family names of some species in your region. For example, daisies are in the Asteraceae family; sparrows are in the Passeridae family.

4. **Experiment with a spiral.** Joanna Macy is an eco-philosopher who has developed a program called [The Work that Reconnects](#). These exercises are interior work that focuses on moving people from despair to empowerment.

Macy's framework is a spiral with four movements that repeat: gratitude, honoring our pain, seeing with new eyes and going forth. The spiral and many of the practices used in trainings are available on this website. Macy's four movements resonate with themes in Christianity. She can help us see them with fresh eyes.

Household Practices

The "household" these practices refer to is your congregation and the practices pertain to your corporate worship. This week, think about how your worship might open itself to creation's presence.

1. **Acknowledge the land you worship on:** Cheyenne pastor Lawrence Hart says that in Cheyenne ceremonies, the priest begins by touching the earth four times. In other Native American traditions, a pipe is pointed in the seven directions. Find culturally appropriate ways to pay your respects to the land you worship on in your upcoming worship services.
2. **Add a Season of Creation** to your yearly worship cycle. See *The Season of Creation* in Additional Resources below.
3. **Intercessory prayer for creation:** Do creation care concerns come up during sharing times? Pray for sick parts of nature as well as sick people. What about a climate change prayer ministry?
4. **Notice how creation participates in the liturgical seasons:** In the Northern Hemisphere, Easter comes at a time of outdoor rebirth and Advent falls during the darkest time of the year. Find ways to accent these relationships and help others appreciate creation's part in the drama.
5. **Hold an outdoor service** or tweak an outdoor service you already have. For some of us, an outdoor service consists of carting all our indoor paraphernalia outside. There, on a mowed lawn next to an industrial cornfield, we are less comfortable than usual and

derive little benefit from being outside. Think differently about what it means to worship outdoors with creation. Are there ways birdsong can figure in your worship service? Can a naturalist help you learn the names of nearby wildflowers? Can a confession or time of prayer include holding and studying natural objects? See the [Wild Church Network](#) for ideas.

6. **A broader understanding of offering:** In an age of automatic deposit, the pass-the-plate ritual can lose its meaning. Try incorporating one of these ideas:
 - *A spring offering of flowers* or houseplants might enable people to remember and share natural beauty.
 - *A summer offering of garden vegetables* could provide food for a local food pantry.
 - *A trash offering* could be part of a confession. Participants bring forward bags of trash, acknowledging their need for the Great Householder to recycle the wastes we produce. Also pray for the people who process your trash.
7. **Native plants for altar flowers:** Commit to using native plants rather than chemical-doused imported flowers. Use them as an opportunity to teach about your bioregion.
8. **Notice natural materials used in your worship:** List the ways nature provides for your worship, and track where the raw materials come from. Worship materials might include bread, grape juice, water for baptisms, fabric for banners, wood for benches, and so on. Is it possible to get locally grown grapes or wheat for your communion services? If you baptize indoors, could you use water from a river within your area of study or collect rainwater from your property? How beautiful to begin a life of faith with this connection to one's own watershed.
9. **Communion:** Acknowledge the land that grew the wheat and the grapes during communion rituals. Include food for other species on your communion table as a reminder of God's provision of food for all creatures.
10. **Plan a series of worship services** based on other-than-human images for God.
11. **Sharing devotional time with creation:**
 - Is it possible to have an outdoor area on your church property that encourages people to connect with creation? Add a bench, plant a privacy hedge, put a bird feeder on a patio or take other steps to make this happen.
 - Set aside bulletin board space to run a monthly feature on species that live on your property or in your community.

Additional Resources

Bouma-Prediger, Steven. *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010.

Making wise decisions related to creation care rarely just happens, or happens through logic alone. Instead of asking, “What should we do?” Bouma-Prediger asks, “What kind of people should we be?” See chapter 6, “What Kind of People Ought We to Be?” for a discussion of ecological virtues that can form and sustain those who care for creation.

Chase, Steven. *Nature as Spiritual Practice.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011.

For many of us, time in nature is what sustains our courage, hope and action. Chase provides contemplative exercises for approaching nature with reverence and awe. The *Field Guide to Nature as Spiritual Practice* is intended for outdoor use. It contains roughly the same material but more practices and less theologizing.

Freeman, Charles. [“Borrowed Holy Land: The New Hymnal and Creation Justice.”](#)

Unbound: An Interactive Journal of Christian Social Justice. 18 Dec. 2013. Web. 20 May 2014.

The author reviews three categories of creation hymnody in a Presbyterian hymnal: creation imagery, creation praise and creation justice. Freeman’s categories are helpful even if you do not use this hymnbook.

Habel, Norman, et. al. *The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary.* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011.

[Season of Creation.](#) The Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

The Season of Creation encourages churches to add a four-week liturgical season focused on God as Creator to the worship cycle each year. The season is an opportunity to empathize with the groaning of creation, to celebrate the ways that Christ is connected to creation and to understand the Holy Spirit in relation to creation. The preaching commentary includes theological background for the Season of Creation and commentary on the selected texts. The website contains songs, prayers, litanies, worship resources.

Hart, Lawrence. “The Earth is a Song Made Visible: A Cheyenne Christian Perspective.” In *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry*, Steve Heinrichs, ed. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2013.

Hart contrasts the “placelessness” of most Christian services with the attention to local geography found in Native American ceremonies. He calls all of us to rethink our worship in ways that “foster a more communal, intimate and personal relationship to the earth.”

Macy, Joanna. [The Work that Reconnects.](#)

Macy’s work focuses on moving people from despair to empowerment using a specific set of practices. Her framework is a spiral with four movements: gratitude, honoring our pain, seeing with new eyes and going forth. See Spiritual Practice #4.

Outdoor forms of worship: See the [Wild Church Network](#) or [Communities of the Mystic Christ](#) websites.

Sawtell, Peter, ed. [Not Ordinary Times](#). Eco-Justice Ministries, Web, 2017.

Not Ordinary Times is a call to a six-month worship focus relevant to a time of ecological crisis.

**Stewart, Benjamin M. *A Watered Garden: Christian Worship and Earth's Ecology*.
Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2011.**

This is a brief, lovely book that illustrates the ways in which worship and ecology are interrelated. Topics covered include water, food, seasons and days, communion, offerings, burials. *A Watered Garden* could be a group study for a worship commission, as each chapter includes discussion questions.