

Every Creature Singing

Embracing the Good News for Planet Earth

Leader's Guide:

Unit 1: Biblical and Theological Roots

[Leader's introduction](#) to the curriculum

[Session 1](#) Connecting Your Faith with Your Place

[Session 2](#) Jesus and Creation: In Search of a Whole Gospel

[Session 3](#) Biblical Views of Nature

[Session 4](#) The Human Calling



Leader's Guide Introduction

The leader's guide contains only material related to leading the class. **Please read the Participant Guide before consulting the Leader's Guide**, so you are familiar with the content of the session. You as the leader of this study will have the following materials to work with:

Participant Guide – each session includes:

- **Knowing Your Faith:**
 - Suggested scriptures and appropriate [ecological lens questions](#).
 - An essay on the session's scripture
 - Discussion questions
- **Knowing Your Place:** Questions focused on your local community
- **Practices:** Suggested spiritual and household practices.
- **Resources** for further study if desired.

Leader's Guide – each session includes:

- **Knowing Your Faith**
 - Goal options for the session
 - A brief sample lesson plan for those who like things spelled out.
 - Ideas for leading the session
 - Some sessions may include resources in addition to those in the Participant Guide
- **Knowing Your Place**
 - Instructions related to the local area you chose to investigate.
 - Online and other resources to help you answer the Knowing Your Place questions regarding your own community.

You will need to prioritize what is undoubtedly too much material. A lively discussion on one text, one place question or one spiritual practice could take the whole hour. That's okay; review the outline each week and try to maintain a balance over the course of the series. Or make a conscious decision to emphasize one element over others based on the needs of your group.

Suggestions for Working with the Ecological Lens Questions

Encourage your class to read the scriptures and essays before coming to class so that you don't need to spend a lot of time reading or reviewing. Have copies of the ecological lens questions available but don't try to cover all of them. If you apply one of the ecological lens questions each week, your group will still get some practice with all of them. The participant guide suggests the questions that might be most fruitful to look at with that week's scriptures.

Consider Outreach:

Have you thought of inviting the neighbors? The emphasis on learning about your local community might be a draw for people who wouldn't normally come to church.

Choosing the Best Format for Your Group

We designed this curriculum with a quarter-long Christian education class in mind, but that doesn't mean you need to use it that way. We hope people will be creative in adapting this material to fit their time frame and context. The material below outlines a few of the ways we can imagine drawing on this material for a shorter series, worship, and retreats.

1. The Standard Format: A 13-week quarter during a Christian education hour

The class covers one session each week with the 13th Sunday available for taking a field trip or planning next steps. Participants are expected to arrive having read the texts for the week and the essay that accompanies each session. They are also invited to try one or more of the practices listed in the sessions.

At least two people share the leadership load. One focuses on the ideas presented in the scripture readings and essays, and a second person works with the Knowing Your Place questions about the local community. Another person could introduce the practices suggested or invite discussion on this part of the curriculum.

Giving each of these areas adequate attention will be challenging. You will need to make choices, and some areas might not be covered each week. One way to make sure the Bible study piece gets covered is to kick off your 13-week unit by offering Retreat D, *Finding Creation in the Word*, the week before you begin. Similarly, concluding with one of the other retreats below could help cement practices.

This material *could* be a church-wide study with all of the Christian education classes focused on creation care for a quarter. If you do that, consider shuffling class groupings so that household members meet in the same group. If families or housemates experience the same discussions, they can then more easily agree on decisions in their homes.

If you know you do want a quarter-long study, stop here and go to Session 1.

2. Ideas for Other Formats

A. The Abridged Format I: A Four to Six-Week Unit

Use the sessions as written, but focus on just one of the three units. Each one is four weeks long:

- Exploring Biblical and Theological Foundations
- Pursuing Peace and Justice
- Choosing a Sustainable Lifestyle

Coming back to the other units later will keep creation care in front of the group over an extended period of time without wearing out the topic.

For a six-week session, use the additional two weeks to summarize the units you are not covering. For example, if you want to focus on Pursuing Peace and Justice, you might begin with an introductory session that explains the ecological lens questions and circle questions from Session 1. For your sixth gathering, reflect on how choosing a sustainable lifestyle is part of pursuing peace and justice, using Session 9.

B. The Abridged Format II: An Eight Week Unit

Choose one of the units and allow two weeks for each session instead of one. Spend the first week discussing the biblical texts and essay. Also introduce the suggested practices and Knowing Your Place questions. The second week, focus on your local community and allow time for people to discuss their experiences with the suggested practices. This extended format might be needed in a congregation where Christian education time is short or also includes time for sharing of prayer concerns. It also allows more time for review and application.

C. A Worship and Christian Education Series

Choose the sessions that interest you to create a worship series. Use the suggested texts and/or ideas from the essays as the basis of a sermon. You have permission to borrow from

the essays provided you give MCCN a footnote.

Combining a shortened version of the curriculum with a worship series and running them simultaneously has advantages. For one thing, it sends the message that creation care is a concern for the entire church, not just a few people with an agenda. Secondly, the sermon and worship time can cover the material people should have read but may not have. This brings everyone up to speed for fruitful discussions.

D. The Tracked Model: A 13-week Quarter with Interest Groups

This approach assumes you are a larger congregation with multiple Christian education classes. Offer two or more *Every Creature Singing* classes and allow people to select the emphases that matter to them most. All of the classes cover the same material the same week, but one emphasizes the Knowing Your Faith pieces; another leans toward the Knowing Your Place piece; a third devotes time to the Practices section.

E. "The Works": A Yearlong Transformational Study

The twelve sessions could work well for a monthly emphasis. One worship service per month could address the Knowing Your Faith content from the curriculum. Other material could be explored through field trips, neighborhood walks or a spiritual practice challenge in the church newsletter.

3. Ideas for Retreats

A. Shaping Our Spiritual Lives as if the Earth Mattered

Select several of the spiritual practices suggested and take time to do them together in a retreat setting. Or the retreat could encourage people to interact with the nature present on your own property.

B. A Knowing Your Place Staycation

Instead of using fossil fuels to drive away from your community for an extended time together, explore your own community using this curriculum. Break up into interest groups to pursue questions from different sessions. Meet back together to share findings, a meal, worship.

This idea could complement a Christian education class on the biblical portion of the *Every Creature Singing* curriculum or stand alone. If you have a river within your target area, canoeing can be another interesting way to get a new perspective on your landscape.

C. Visiting Another Community

If your congregation has the habit of meeting together for a yearly retreat an hour or two away from the church building, consider making this year's gathering a chance to get to know another community through the Knowing Your Place questions you've been using. Choose an area that is geographically, racially or economically different from your own.

Variation: Two congregations who are working through this curriculum at the same time could take turns hosting each other for a day.

D. Finding Creation in the Word: A Bible Study Retreat Using the Ecological Lens Questions

A three-hour experience devoting time to the texts covered in this curriculum and the ecological lens questions. If you are using the weekly sessions as well, place this retreat beforehand or early in the quarter. It would be a great opportunity to teach people this approach to scripture.

- Work through each of the ecological lens questions with examples drawn from the curriculum.
- Then have small groups choose a favorite text, try out the method as a whole and share their learnings.
- Conclude by choosing one of the texts presented and together, brainstorm ways this passage could be shared in a worship service in a way that helps people see and hear creation in the text.

E. A Watershed Discipleship Workday

This is a four to eight-hour block in which participants share creation care tasks:

- around the church such as installing insulation or a rain garden
- in members' homes
- or in the community, such as helping with a river clean-up or public witness.

People with hands-on skills might mentor others in the art of changing a showerhead or weather stripping. Including worship, prayer or recreation can make the day feel more like a retreat.

Ideas for Outreach:

- LED light bulb giveaway: On a limited income, it is difficult to make up-front investments even if they save you money. Find a way to share LED light bulbs with low-income members of your community.
- Youth fundraiser carwash with a twist: Include tire pressure checks along with the cleaning service provided and give each customer a sheet about energy-efficient car maintenance and driving practices. ([See gas mileage tips here.](#)) Coach youth in ways to pitch the energy efficiency idea.
- Check with your local park department or city hall for suggestions on ways you can contribute to the environmental health of your community. Culling invasive species on parkland is a group project that anyone can participate in. A river clean-up in canoes could combine intergenerational fun, a valuable service and a new view of your community. Planting trees in a low-income neighborhood or maintaining plantings is another valuable service.
- Link your choice of project to something you learned through the Knowing Your Place questions in this curriculum. Note that these contacts with the public are also an opportunity to share a brochure about your church and a friendly invitation to visit some Sunday.

Every Creature Singing, Leader's Guide

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Knowing Your Faith

Jump to Knowing Your Place

Choose Your Goals

Participants will...

- Understand why this curriculum is named *Every Creature Singing* and be able to imagine the vision it comes from.
- Know what you mean by an “ecological lens” and what questions are involved.
- Know what is meant by Place Questions and know roughly what is included in the map area your group is going to examine.
- Be excited about exploring the Bible, their community and the suggested spiritual and household practices in this curriculum.

Advance Preparation (*Don't worry, there's much less to do next week.*)

Orient Yourself to This Curriculum by reviewing the following:

- The Introduction and Session 1 of the Participant Guide
- The Introduction and Session 1 of both the Knowing Your Faith and the Knowing Your Place parts of the Leader's Guide.
- The Place Questions and suggested practices covered in this curriculum. Overviews are provided in the Leader Resources, pages 7 to 20.

Communicate with Prospective Attenders:

Put an announcement in your church newsletter or send an email inviting people to look at the [Every Creature Singing](#) page of the MCCN website and download the sessions they need. Encourage them to read the introduction and Session 1 before the first class.

Delegate Roles:

The primary leader will work mainly with the biblical/theological piece of the study. However, your group will benefit greatly if people with other gifts help with the different facets of the course. Tap several people who are planning to attend the class for the following roles:

- **Knowing Your Place Leader or Leaders:** This role requires weekly research. If one person fills this role, choose an outward-looking individual with Internet access. An environmental professional would be ideal if you have one in the congregation.

There is also merit to dividing up the Place Questions week by week to people with different interests. If your congregation is skeptical of “tree huggers,” it might help to have input from a variety of people instead of one green enthusiast. Besides, the questions are not only about nature and ecology; they cover a broad range of topics related to community living.

It is important to be clear with your Place Leaders about how much time they will have in class. Check in on timing each week.

- **Keeper of Practices:** The practice keeper need not have teaching responsibilities, but it helps to have someone present who is alert to this facet of the course. They might bring a new angle to the discussion or find a way to implement class insights in your worship or congregational life. Another way to engage people and spread the responsibility would be to call for volunteers at the end of each class period: *“Who could try one of the spiritual practices and report back?”*

Gather Supplies:

- **A map** to use with the Place Questions. See the Knowing Your Place Introduction and coordinate with your Place Leader.
- **Ecological Lens Questions:** Participants should have copies of these available each week. Make copies of either the bookmark or the handout in the Leader Resources below.
- **Printed copies of the Participant Guide in three-ring binders:** If your group includes people without Internet access, they will need these to read at home. Keep one or two in class as well. Your church office manager may be able to make the necessary copies.
- **A bulletin board** is helpful for hanging up local news clippings related to your study.
- **Optional visual aid:** If you want to represent the environmental stakeholders beyond your classroom, see More Ideas #4 below and gather the necessary items.

Suggestions for Leading Session 1

Sample Lesson Plan

In the remaining sessions, you will need to decide which goals are your priorities. For this session, all of the goals on page 1 are important so that people know where you're headed.

- **Make sure everyone has access** to the curriculum in either electronic or paper form. Reading online makes it easy to follow links to other resources.
- **Begin with a prayer of intent** to help focus the class. An example is provided on the back of the ecological lens bookmark.
- **Hear people's initial thoughts on faith and place:** The first four discussion questions in the Participant Guide can be used whether the group has read the reflective essay or not. The supplementary questions assume the group has read the session. Use discussion question #1 as an icebreaker and give everyone a chance to speak. Follow up with question 2 and/or 3. Then briefly review the elements of this curriculum that will help you connect your faith with your place:
 - The reflective essays
 - Eco-Lens questions
 - Knowing Your Place Questions
- **Introduce the Eco-Lens Questions:** Distribute copies of the Eco-Lens Questions. A handout version and a bookmark version are available in the Leader Resources. Summarize the material on using an ecological lens in the Participant Guide Introduction (page 8). Encourage people to ponder these questions when they read the scriptures and essays in the Participant Guide.
- **Knowing Your Place:** Review the concept of watershed discipleship mentioned in the introduction. Present the map you prepared and work through the Place Questions.
- **Close** with an idea that interested you from the "God is with us" section of the essay.

More Ideas

1. **Empty chairs:** Include three empty chairs and label them to represent the following voiceless members of our planet who have a stake in your conversations:
 - Future generations
 - Other species

- Those most affected by environmental problems¹

Children's drawings taped to the first chair could evoke future generations. A fish tank, photo collage of animals or a bouquet of native plants might represent other species. Usually, the poor are the ones most vulnerable to the effects of floods, hurricanes or toxins. News clippings or photos from a recent environmental disaster could make this audience concrete.

2. **What if no one's afraid?** If you sense that your group is oblivious to environmental problems, you might want to begin with a brief video recapping the state of affairs. Here are several options:
 - [Welcome to the Anthropocene](#). In three minutes, this U-tube video sums up both the accomplishments of the past 250 years and the planetary challenges we face as a result.
 - [All Things](#): This four-minute video from Intervarsity Christian Fellowship emphasizes that loving our neighbor means caring for creation.
 - Sites such as [National Geographic](#), [The Smithsonian](#) and [Climate Science](#) also have short clips to choose from.
 -
3. **For Discussion Question 5:** If your group has a good grasp of the sweep of biblical history, ponder how **land** is part of the story that the genealogy in Matthew 1 reviews. Here are some ideas for using the ecological lens questions with this text.

Ecological lens questions A & C: Matthew's genealogy is shorthand for the entire history of Israel. It is brimming with stories, many of which have to do with this nation's relationship with its land. While this text doesn't mention any plants, animals or landscape features, they are there in the shadows, along with the wives and mothers of these men. Think of Abraham's long quest for a land to belong to; think of the cedars of Lebanon felled for Solomon's building projects.

Ecological lens question B: Seeing Jesus' name appearing in a genealogy reminds us that God-with-us was born into a particular ecological context and place in history. From there, one might ponder how desert landscapes shaped biblical thought, or the fact that people walked everywhere they went. (More on that next week.)

Ecological lens question D: There's a lot of "begetting" going on in this text. This is a natural process built into creation. Do you see human fertility as a gift from God?

Ecological lens questions D & E: Emmanuel—God incarnate—appears in this text as an unexpected fetus. Jesus comes to us as a human baby, flesh and blood, umbilical cord and amniotic sac, spirit and matter. Throughout Western history, people have tended to value the spiritual and devalue the earthly, but the biblical story insists on holding the two together. God values nature and all its earthy, messy practices!

¹ This idea comes from the social ethicist, Larry Rasmussen. See [Voices from Empty Chairs](#).

Ecological lens question F: The deportation to Babylon is mentioned. Here, Israel's relationship with God and its land is broken due to sin: breaking the covenant, worshipping other gods, failure to keep the Ten Commandments and injustice to the poor. That the land suffers when human beings sin is an idea that is widespread in the Old Testament. Examples include Jeremiah 7:20, 9:10, 12:4. In contrast, Ruth's story is mentioned in the genealogy, evoking just land laws that enable the poor to glean and to regain family land.

Knowing Your Place

Jump to Knowing Your Faith

Why Today's Place Questions Matter

Caring for creation requires a basic knowledge of our own place in the world. We can't care for what we don't know and love. These very basic questions will focus attention on the area you will learn about.

Help with Place Questions

Today's questions can all be answered in class with participants looking at the map you prepared using the instructions in the Knowing Your Place Introduction. If you don't have a map or are short on time, focus on question 4.

1. Do you think the map area your Place Question leader presented is the best choice for your group? Does it include your home? How would you tweak the boundaries?
2. What towns, rural areas and bodies of water are within the area you are studying? Within the broader region?
3. Which parts of the area do you frequently visit? Which parts do you ignore or know little about?
4. What aspects of your community are you curious about? Scan the Place Questions covered in this unit of the curriculum. Mark the questions that are of particular interest.

[Session 2](#)

[Session 3](#)

[Session 4](#)

Every Creature Singing, Leader's Guide

Session 2: Jesus and Creation—In Search of a Whole Gospel

Knowing Your Faith

Jump to Knowing Your Place

Choose Your Goals (*What is your priority? Circle it or add your own.*)

Participants will...

- Expand their understanding of the Gospel to include other parts of creation.
- Imagine what Jesus of Nazareth's relationship with creation might have been like.
- Catch a glimpse of Christ the creator of all things.
- Be eager to try at least one of the spiritual and household practices suggested.
- Become more practiced in using the ecological lens questions.
- Become aware that they live in a watershed and how this connects them to other people and places.
- Walk and bike when possible.

Advance Preparation

- Make a practice of both reading ahead and reviewing where you've been the previous week. This will provide coherence and balance to your discussions.
- Choose no more than three goals. Match your idea choices to the outcomes you hope for.
- If another person is helping with the Knowing Your Place questions, check in on how much time to allow and other logistics. If you are covering this, take time to follow the links provided for at least one question. If you want to show any of the sites in class, make sure your projector and internet connection work properly.
- Knowing Your Faith #1 requires sticky notes.

Suggestions for Leading Session 2

Sample Lesson Plan

Selected Goals:

Participants will...

- Expand their understanding of the Gospel to include other parts of creation.
- Become more practiced in using the ecological lens questions.
- Become aware that they live in a watershed and how this connects them to other people and places.

Sample Class Period:

- Begin with a prayer of intent to focus your discussion. It is important to model this practice. An example is provided on the Eco-Lens hand-out.
- Backtrack to include people who were not present last week. Review the Ecological Lens Questions and the importance of the Knowing Your Place questions for this study.
- Also see how people fared with any of the spiritual or household practices they tried.
- Read Colossians 1:15 - 20 and John 3:16 together and apply Eco-Lens questions A and E, drawing on material from the essay. Then move into Discussion Question #3 in the Participant Guide and have your group reflect on their understandings of Jesus.
- If you have projection available or individuals bring smart phones, view a few photos of Jesus' watershed from the Jesus Trail website. From there, transition to Place Question #1 and get to know your own watershed. Show the [Streamer](#) site suggested. If you don't have projection available in class, connect the idea of Jesus the Hiker to Place Question #3. What experiences do participants have with biking and walking in your community?
- Conclude by mentioning a spiritual practice you hope to try this week by way of encouragement to others.

More Ideas

1. **Seven-word Gospels:** Discussion Question #1 asks people to state their understanding of the Gospel in seven words. Provide people with sticky notes and have them attempt to express the Gospel in seven words. Post the sticky notes on the wall and compare them. Where does non-human creation fit into your group's understanding of the good

news? If it is not represented, ask people to try again and come up with seven-word Gospels that include creation. Here are some examples if your group gets stuck:

- **We and the Earth are saved together.** See the paragraph at the bottom of page 1 of the essay. In contrast, texts such as Isaiah 24:4-6 show the Earth and humans suffering from evil together.
- **God loved the WORLD and gave Jesus.** In this paraphrase of John 3:16, point out that the Greek word for world is *kosmos* and includes all things. Why do we assume that *world* only refers to humans?
- **God's shalom for all creation: you too.** See Session 5 for more on shalom.

2. **What kind of Jesus does your congregation preach?** To make Discussion Question #4 as concrete as possible, jog people's memories by listing a few recent sermons from Gospel texts, or bring in examples of children's curriculum you use. You could also bring a copy of your church's mission statement. Favorite hymns are another window into your theology.
3. **Take an interest poll:** If your group read the curriculum, they may have come with their own questions and interests. You don't need to intervene in the flow unless some people are dominating or the discussion strays off topic.
4. **End times:** Your class may raise the question of how a theology that emphasizes salvation for all of creation deals with end times and/or the end of life. Eco-theologies typically reject the idea that planet Earth is destined for destruction while believers escape to some other reality. They see this idea as inconsistent with the God of the incarnation and a God who raised Jesus from the dead in bodily form. They embrace texts such as Revelation 21 and 22, which depict the presence of God coming to dwell fully on Earth, and interpret most other apocalyptic texts in light of this ultimate, earthy fulfillment. The main point you will want to dwell upon, however, is that whatever future God has in store, we are to live faithfully in the meantime, and that includes loving and caring for God's creation.

For further help on this topic, see:

Rossing, Barbara. *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2004.

Wright, N.T. *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2008.

Knowing Your Place

Jump to Knowing Your Faith

Why the Questions Below Matter

- Many people don't know what a [watershed](#) is or understand that they live in one. Storm water runoff is one of the ways people impact the land. We all need to realize that we are upstream of other people.
- Looking at watersheds versus highways highlights the fact that human civilization is superimposed upon natural systems—sometimes in ways that dominate or interfere with the latter.
- The essay points out the ways in which walking enabled Jesus to know both the wild and human members of his region. Walking and biking have health, environmental, social and spiritual benefits today as well. Your piece of the puzzle is to remind your group of the walking and biking options they have, or introduce them to options they weren't aware of.

Help with Place Questions

- 1. What watersheds make up your region? Are there other natural dividers such as mountains or changes in vegetation?**

A watershed is all the area that drains to a common waterway, such as a stream, lake, estuary, wetland, aquifer, or even the ocean. We all live in a watershed, and our actions affect it. Note that there are major watersheds and sub-watersheds. For example, you might live in the Rock Run Creek watershed as well as the Elkhart River Watershed, as well as the Saint Joe River Watershed. Watersheds are named after the body of water they drain into.

You can find your watershed using one of these watershed trackers:

- [EPA Surf Your Watershed](#). The EPA site highlights the boundaries of watersheds and includes a lot of other information about water quality. [Ten Ways to Help Your Watershed](#) shares practical tips.

- [Streamer](#) This site highlights rivers. When you zoom in on your own area, choose either the upstream or downstream button and click on one of the little triangles. You can see where the water in your nearest river comes from and where it goes after it leaves your area.

2. What roadways connect or sever communities in your locale? Whom do they serve best? How do they affect wildlife or natural areas?

The first two questions you can answer by looking at your map.

Ask if participants may have stories about wildlife encounters on roads. With help from the articles below, you can share a “wildlife perspective,” highlighting the challenges that roadways present to wildlife.

- [Wildlife Protection: Keeping it Simple](#) This U.S. Department of Transportation site has lots of stories of ways road builders are considering their effects on the local ecology.
- [People's Way](#) This site tells about US 93 N in Montana where wildlife was considered in road design.

3. How well does your community serve bikers and walkers? How might you make better use of the pedestrian options that are there, or what adaptations are needed?

- [Pedestrian and Biking Information Center](#) This site is stuffed with information on walkable communities and how and why to move in that direction. For example, you can find:
 - [A checklist](#) to rate the quality of your neighborhood for biking and walking. This could be a youth group project.
 - [Case studies](#) on all aspects of walking and biking.
 - State by state information, on laws, maps, who to contact, etc.
 - [Information](#) on funding a project.

- [Trail Link](#) This site will give you detailed information and maps on trails designed specifically for biking and walking anywhere in the U.S.
- [Walk Score](#) See how your community rates on a scale of 0-100 for walkability. This is a useful site if you are moving and considering different neighborhoods in an urban area.

Every Creature Singing, Leader's Guide

Session 3: Biblical Views of Nature

Knowing Your Faith

Jump to Knowing Your Place

Choose Your Goals (*What is your priority? Circle it or add your own.*)

People will . . .

- Examine their attitudes toward nature and compare and contrast them with the ideas presented in the essay.
- Broaden their understanding of community to include the community of creation.
- Learn from each other about parts of the natural world that class members value. They will identify actions that could help sustain these aspects of nature.
- See ecological learning as a part of discipleship.

Advance Preparation

- A good way to prepare for this session is to spend time in nature. Reading nature writers is another source of inspiration. Two authors who deliver short pieces that can be read at bedtime or at a bus stop are Sy Montgomery and Edwin Way Teale. Or find a book of poetry by Mary Oliver.
- Consider ways to connect with nature during this session, such as holding class outside, taking a brief walk or bringing a few natural objects to pass around. Things you found on your church property are especially appropriate.

Suggestions for Leading Session 3

Sample Lesson Plan

Selected Goals:

Participants will...

- Learn from each other about parts of the natural world that class members value.
- Broaden their understanding of community to include the community of creation.

Sample Class Period:

- Begin this session with people's experiences related to nature. Everyone should be able to respond to discussion question 1 and the first part of 2. Hear from each member, or break into small groups to discuss.
- Interact with scripture and the essay by way of question 5 on creation as community and the ideas on page 3-5 of the participant guide.
- Look at the biome map link provided under Knowing your Place and reflect on the first two questions there.
- Close with the exercise paraphrasing Psalm 104 suggested under Spiritual Practices.

More Ideas

1. **Nature as community:** Has your group had experiences that enable them to imagine non-humans as members of their congregation and community? Here's an outtake from the essay that might serve as an example:

I once met a woman whose teenage son was training a pair of oxen on the family farm. After spending a good deal of time with the animals, he left for summer camp. The family was sharing a meal together the night of his return when they suddenly had the uncanny feeling they were being watched. There at the window stood the boy's oxen, peering into the dining room as if indignant about their exclusion from the boy's welcome-home party. They had never escaped from their pen before and never did so again, the woman said. "Now my son always makes sure he greets his oxen first when he has been away," she laughed.

2. **Ecological learning and discipleship:** If you plan to raise question 8 you might mention [Master Naturalist](#) programs offered through state extension offices. See if your community has one.
3. **If you have farmers in your congregation,** you have a unique opportunity to explore the practicalities and challenges of an issue such as the loss of monarch butterfly habitat. (See household practice #1.) What would it cost a farmer to farm as if monarch butterflies were important? How do you weigh these costs in light of Exodus 23:10-11 where the land's sabbaticals are intended to benefit both the poor and animals?
4. **Nature in worship services:** How might your congregational life emphasize our relationship with creation? Here are some ideas to think about:
 - *Visuals in the sanctuary:* Are native wildflowers available?

- *Offering:* What about seasonal offerings of fruits and vegetables to share with a local food pantry?
- *Communion:* How can you help people relate the elements to the bread and grapes they came from?
- *Fellowship time:* Is there an inviting outdoor area that entices people to connect with creation?
- *Bulletin boards:* You could feature a species that lives on your property or in your community each month.

Note that you can revisit these ideas in session 12.

Knowing Your Place

Jump to Knowing Your Faith

Why the Questions Below Matter

- The essay for this session emphasizes the value the biblical tradition places on *all* parts of nature, including those without economic value. If God loves and attends to these things, we should too.
- We need to learn to distinguish healthy ecosystems from ones that need our help. The earth does indeed have a voice, but most of us are not skilled in interpreting its language.

Help with Place Questions

Choose one or two questions to pursue. The first two go together; the last two stand on their own.

1. What biome is your community in? Where else in the world is this biome found?

- [Blue Planet Biomes](#) See a map of the world's biomes here, along with definitions and descriptions.
- Most U.S. readers will live within the [temperate broadleaf forest](#) or the [grasslands](#) biomes.
- Canadian readers may be in the [boreal forest biome](#).

2. To what extent are the plants and animals characteristic of this biome present and healthy in your community? Where would you look for them?

You may need to look for a local extension agent or master naturalist to help you with this question, but here are a few clues based on the biomes most of you will fall into:

Due to the appeal of prairie soil for farming, less than 4% of U.S. prairies remain. Meanwhile, the [Arc of the Appalachia Preserve System](#) has this to say about the temperate broadleaf forests in the East:

Although much of the East is still covered with trees, the vast majority of eastern woodlands have considerably less than half of their original species diversity. Ancient and fully intact temperate hardwood forests are extremely rare today, occupying less than ½ of one percent of their original range in the United States.

3. What natural areas are present within your local area? What do you know about them? What do you wish you knew? Which of these do you and your class members make use of?

- Natural areas include state or national nature preserves and parks, county or city parks, private nature centers, private land that is left in its natural state. At least the first two categories should be visible on your map, and these entities will have web sites you can mine for information or brochures you can pick up.
- Encourage your group to consider local vacations. Why drive for hours when you can enjoy a relaxing weekend within 25 miles of home? This is one way to reduce fossil fuel consumption and stress.

4. What plant and animal species inhabit your church property? Learn their names and a little bit about them.

- A wide variety of [phone apps](#) can enable you to quickly limit your search by region, color, shape or other identifiers.
- Consider getting some field guides for your church library. Recommended:
 - *Peterson's, National Audubon Society, Stokes or Tekiela guides.*
 - The guides by Tekiela focus on a particular state and organize species by color: a big help to beginners.

Every Creature Singing, Leader's Guide

Session 4: Finding Our Place in Creation

Knowing Your Faith

Jump to Knowing Your Place

Goals for Session 4

Participants will . . . *(Circle your top priority.)*

- Understand living in right relationship with the Earth as central to the role God has given us.
- Identify areas where they have dominion over land or other species and reflect on what responsible dominion looks like in their own contexts.
- Be able to hear themes of interconnectedness and dependence in the Genesis creation stories. Be able to name ways we are *like* the rest of creation as well as ways humans are unique.
- Reflect on what the call to earth keeping means for the mission of their congregation.

Advance Preparation

- Read through the session and spend time with Genesis 1-2. Circle the goals and discussion questions that seem right for your group. Look back over Session 3, since the two sessions are closely related.
- If other people are leading the Knowing Your Place questions and practices suggestions, coordinate how their parts will fit in.
- Find a copy of your church's mission statement for question 5. Write it on poster board if it is brief or copy it so that everyone can see it.

Remember these are suggestions to choose from and adapt.

Suggestions for Leading Session 4

Selected Goals

- Identify areas where those present have dominion over land or other species and reflect on what responsible dominion looks like in their own contexts.
- Reflect on what the call to earth keeping means for the mission of the congregation.

Sample Lesson Plan

- If you're flexible, ask your group what ideas from the Participant Guide interest them most and begin there.
- Have everyone list what they think the top 5 concerns of the Christian faith are and rank them. Work individually and then compare answers. Where does our relationship with the rest of creation come in the list and why? Engage with ideas from the essay in the participant guide while you do this.
- Evaluate the extent to which earth keeping is part of your congregation's mission as suggested in Discussion Question 5. Draw on relevant documents from your congregation. Offer examples of actions from question 9 and see what people think of them.
- Then move to where individuals sense they have dominion as suggested in the Place Questions.

More Ideas

1. **Remember to begin the discussion** with the prayer of intent you printed out for Session 1. Or use your own prayer of intent to focus the discussion.
2. **Create cognitive dissonance:** The challenge with Genesis 1 is that for some, it is over-familiar. People think they know what it says and lapse quietly into a daze. Of the four points made in the essay, pick the one you think will be most challenging for your group and then "discover" it for yourselves by working through the text.
3. **Not everyone takes kindly** to the idea that beloved scriptures have done harm. At the end of the second paragraph, the essay asserts that misuse of the idea of dominion has helped to "raze forests and prairies, enslave Africans and push Native Americans off their lands." Here are some examples you could cite to make that statement more

concrete:

- [Dominion Theology](#) is a contemporary movement that celebrates Christian nationalism and promotes religious supremacy. Genesis 1:26-28 is a primary text for adherents.
- [The Doctrine of Discovery](#) is a legal framework dating from the 15th century that gave Christian governments the right to invade Indigenous lands.
- [Manifest Destiny](#) This is a Methodist article on the ways American colonists appropriated biblical imagery in their conquest of Native Americans.
- [A Nigerian Perspective](#) The author of this essay, Amadi Ahiamadu, links Genesis 1:26-28 with destructive oil mining in the Niger Delta in Nigeria.

4. What are we saved *from*? If you want to raise discussion question 6, check out the following points that reveal how a broken relationship with the earth emerges in these early chapters of the Bible:

- The word, *earth*, occurs 80 times in these 11 chapters.
- The act that causes Adam and Eve to lose their place in the garden involves a tree. Humans refuse to respect the limits that God set on their use of nature.
- The consequence of this act is a broken relationship with the earth: it now grows thorns and thistles and raising food is difficult.
- The beautiful, life-giving Earth cries out when it is stained with Abel's blood.
- Cain is cursed from the earth and driven from the soil when he murders.
- The earth is filled with violence before the flood.
- Human sin brings about an environmental catastrophe (the flood).
- The fate of humans and animals is linked in the flood story. The salvation God offers via the ark and flood is for humans, animals and the earth, which is washed clean.
- The covenant God makes in Genesis 9 is with every living creature, not just Noah's family.

5. Is caring for creation part of your mission? These resources can help with discussion question 5:

- [See examples](#) of mission statements that include creation. This link will take you to MCCN's Score Sheet Discussion Guide. Scroll down to Appendix 1, pp. 11-13.
- Read "Mission After Christendom: The Missio Dei," in *Worship and Mission After Christendom*, by Alan and Eleanor Kreider, Herald Press, 2011.

6. **Spending congregational resources on creation:** The suggestions under question 9 are just examples. Think of options that could provoke discussion in your own context.
7. **Modern science's story of origins:** If question 10 intrigues you, the following resources may be of interest. These are academic readings from a mainline perspective.
 - Brown, William. *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010.
 - Ruether, Rosemary Radford. "Does Science have a New Creation Story?" in *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 1994, 32-58.
 - Brian Swimme, [Center for the Story of the Universe](#), or *The Universe Story* by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry.

Knowing Your Place

Jump to Knowing Your Faith

Why The Questions Below Matter

This session presents a view of human identity that is truthful about our giftedness and the power we wield but tempered by an emphasis on humility and service. It is important to name the ways in which we do have power and to recognize responsibilities we may not have acknowledged.

Help with Place Questions

1. **Where do participants exercise "dominion" over the land, water or other natural resources in any way?** Mark homes and workplaces. Note areas where participants shop or can vote on land-related issues.

Simple: Just talk about this question and get people to name and reflect on the ways that they exert influence over the landscape: owning property, workplace effects,

shopping, voting, etc.

A little more work: If you created a custom map at [Google My Maps](https://www.google.com/maps) as suggested in the Introduction, see if an Excel sheet of your members' addresses is available from the church office. You can then upload all those data points onto your map using the *Add Layer* button in the white box on the left side of your map. Your class will enjoy seeing how their households are configured on the map, and you can use this layer other weeks with other questions.

Paper map option: Have participants mark their locations on your map with stickers or thumbtacks at the beginning of class.

2. What entities (i.e. land owners, county commissioners, developers, city planners, etc.) within your local area exercise the most decision-making power over the landscape? What do they do?

First, see what you can discern by looking at your map and the land uses it reveals. Answers will likely fall into these categories: Private land owners such as farmers; corporations and industries; individual residential properties; government organizations. Reflect on any surprises. If you've been watching the local news, you may also have stories to share that illustrate the decision-making power of these different groups.