

Biblical Grounding and Social Principles for Creation Care

“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” Genesis 1:31

*“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
God makes me lie down in green pastures;
God leads me beside still waters; God restores my soul.
God leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.” Psalm 23:1-3*

*“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it,
for he has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers.” Psalm 24:1-2*

Jesus knew the Hebrew scriptures and prayed regularly in the hills around Lake Galilee. He often used examples from nature in his parables – seeds and soils, birds and flowers, foxes and fish, sheep and hens. Jesus taught outdoors and celebrated the goodness of God’s creation every day.

At the last General Conference, The United Methodist Church adopted a newly revised Social Principles where “The Community of All Creation” section of says:

We affirm that all creation belongs to God and is a manifestation of God’s goodness and providential care. Human beings, nonhuman animals, plants, and other sentient and non-sentient beings participate in the community of creation, and their flourishing depends on the care of all God’s creation. Rather than treating creation as if it were placed here solely for humanity’s use and consumption, we are called to practice responsible stewardship and to live in right relationship with the Creator and with the whole of God’s creation We are also called to honor the role of every part of creation in healing the whole; thus we praise God with the whole of creation (Ps. 148) and recognize that we are part of complex ecosystems, all valued by God.

We affirm our sacred calling to be responsible stewards and to lovingly tend all that God has wrought. We recognize the inherent worth of God’s creation, celebrate earth’s abundance and diversity, and, along with the entirety of the cosmos, give praise to its Creator. We recognize we are interconnected members of complex ecosystems, intricate webs of life, all of which have their origins in God’s gracious act of creation.

We acknowledge that unsustainable human activities have placed the entirety of God’s creation in peril. Further, we confess that the degradation and wholesale destruction of the natural environment threatens unprecedented harm, bringing danger to human and nonhuman life alike.

... Global warming and climate change are already creating extreme conditions that threaten the entirety of life on earth. Over industrialization, widespread deforestation, and overreliance on fossil fuels are but some of the human activities that have contributed to the buildup of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide in the earth’s atmosphere.

A sharp upsurge in greenhouse gases over past decades already has resulted in a steady rise in sea levels, growing acidification of the world’s oceans, increased droughts and famines, and the intensification of extreme weather events. Climate

scientists warn that the window of opportunity for reversing the negative effects of global warming and climate change is rapidly closing.

Without concerted action by individuals, churches, communities, shareholders, businesses, governments, and international organizations, the negative effects will become irreversible. [emphasis added]

(pp 9-10 Social Principles)

“The section ‘Stewardship of Creation,’ exhorts church members to see themselves as the guardians of God's creation. United Methodists are called to “respect, protect, and care for the creation and all interrelated aspects of it.” It advises United Methodists to devote their attention to challenges such as:

- environmental racism, through which many communities of color have become dumping grounds for dangerous, toxic substances,
- sustainable policies and practices,
- food justice, which encompasses not only feeding people but also reducing the detrimental influence of agribusiness and monoculture,
- caring for all creatures,
- protecting space from militarization and economic exploitation, and
- affirming both science and traditional wisdom.”

(Quoted from The Social Principles Part 2 **by Cynthia B. Astle** March 3rd, 2025)

In 2023, the Dakotas Conference adopted a resolution to encourage local UM churches to establish Green Teams and one church, Yankton First, did that, and presented their accomplishments at the 2024 Annual Conference. The presentation was well attended, and a new Green Team at Huron Riverview is being formed.

At the 2020/2024 General Conference held in Charlotte, NC, The United Methodist Church mandated that every Annual Conference designate the position of **Caretaker of God's Creation** <https://umcreationjustice.org/caretakers-coordinators/> with an assisting “green team” of volunteers. (Also see: <https://umcreationjustice.org/about/annual-conference-creation-justice-connections/> and <https://www.creationjustice.org/>)

The Survey Questions and Key Findings Revealed

In order to lay the groundwork for the position of Caretaker of God's Creation and the Conference Creation Care/Justice (Green) Team in the Dakotas Conference, I (Marty Toepke-Floyd) conducted a survey sample by telephone and email. The seven survey questions addressed current creation care ministries (broadly defined), vision for future goals, and openness to learn more about local green teams. The questions asked are:

1. What is your church currently doing in the area of **creation care**? (lighting, heating, landscaping, recycling, programming, learning, worshiping, advocating)
2. How **organized** are the efforts in these activities and for how long?
3. What **vision** is there for the future and/or **openness** to establishing a Green Team?

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4. Does your church engage in any **foreign mission** work or trips? Where? (Mission engagement exposes the church to other cultures and makes people more aware of effects of climate change, pollution, etc. around the world.)
5. How aware is your church about **UM policies and resources** on climate justice and creation care?
6. Is there **anyone else** I should talk to about these questions?
7. Would you or someone you know be interested/willing to serve on a **conference level creation care team** (Green Team)?

In the Fall of 2024, I began this Earthkeeper project to survey a significant sample of local United Methodist churches in the Dakotas Conference regarding their efforts to engage in Creation Care ministries and Climate Justice practices. *Knowing which churches are active, inactive or open to doing more is critical in moving forward to establish "Green Teams" in more churches across the Dakotas Conference.*

Tabulation of Survey Results from Sample Churches

Below is the raw data from the sample surveys. I spoke (or corresponded) with 55 persons (mostly clergy) covering 70 churches (including one church camp) in the Dakotas Annual Conference. I attempted but could not connect with 8 other persons.

LED lights Installed	Conserve heat, cooling & water	Reduce use of paper and plastic	Recycle paper, cardboard, plastic & metal	Gardens and landscaping	Study and Worship Creation Care
33	17	14	26	9	19
Engaged in cross-cultural mission work	Low to no level of awareness of UM Policies	Moderate to high awareness of UM Policies	Open and/or interested in a Green Team	Active or forming a Green Team	Have a vision for Creation Care
19	27	7	17	2	10

The salient points revealed by the survey of 70 UM churches are:

1. About half of the churches sampled have installed LED lighting primarily as a way to save money by reducing electricity usage. Environmental stewardship has been a secondary factor for some churches. Trustees or some other organized group have taken the lead, and only two churches have or are organizing a formal Green Team.
2. Roughly half of churches have some sort of recycling waste paper, cardboard, plastic, aluminum, etc. and this effort occurs mostly in towns and cities that have curbside recycling. Individuals do the recycling in some churches.

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3. A third of the churches are engaged in cross-culture mission work, and so have a greater awareness of the environmental conditions and problems others in the world face.
4. Only a few churches have engaged in learning about Creation Care/Climate Justice. Most churches and some pastors are unaware of United Methodist policies and resources regarding Creation Care, Climate Justice and Environmental Stewardship. The United Women in Faith units are the most aware through the “Just Energy 4 All” program, though few units emphasize it.
5. A fourth of the churches surveyed report intentionally conserving heat and cooling. One church (Wahpeton Evergreen UMC) has ground-source heating and cooling which has not only saved on utilities cost, but also lowered their carbon footprint. This system was installed decades ago and has paid off well. McCabe UMC in Bismarck put in ground source heating for the addition at least ten years ago and plans to upgrade their other systems this summer.
6. Barriers to forming a local Green Team include: lingering hard feelings after disaffiliation struggle, politicized attitudes toward energy policies and climate change, and lack of energy to form and fill yet “one more committee.”
7. Roughly a fourth of the churches surveyed are open to learning more about Creation Care through establishing a Green Team in their church.
8. Having a committed and motivated core group of individuals who care about God’s Creation and Climate Justice are key to being engaged in creation care at all levels, and so is a positive attitude of the pastor.

Engaging with Local Churches

There are a variety of innovative ministries already happening in local churches.

- SD State climatologist presented a series on climate change at Sioux Falls First UMC
- Milnor UMC planted a living fence with native trees and grasses
- Pastor Susan Jennys has distributed the First Nations Bible and her church holds an annual “Creation Sunday” worship
- Piedmont UMC hosts a community garden and has a church work day in the spring to help families plant. They are considering planting an orchard, too.
- Arthur UMC has a “Blessing of the Seeds Sunday” for farmers and supports an ecumenical ministry, Growing Hope Globally.
- Lead, SD, Trinity UMC is using the ministry development tool, Simple Church, and what can be done to foster environmental stewardship.
- Montrose UMC is using a similar tool, “Messy Church,” which had a session on Creation Care.

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- Madison UMC has garden boxes to “grow seeds of kindness,” and teaches people how to garden as well as handing out free seed packets.
- Wesley UMC in Sioux Falls has gleaned produced and works at a nearby elementary school to do container gardening
- Sunnycrest UMC put in a retention pond for runoff and teaches that environmental stewardship is part of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.
- Storm Mountain Camp teaches campers about environmental stewardship and is installing water filling stations to cut down on plastic single-use water bottles.

Pierre First Church has offered to host a day long workshop for other churches in the area to come together to explore and engage in what Creation Care in their local church and community could look like. There is no one-size-fits-all Green Team model, and each church can tailor it to meet their own local needs, resources and context to begin addressing the urgent work of Creation Care and Climate Justice.

The Caretaker of God’s Creation and others would lead this workshop for up to a dozen local churches, building relationships to advise, resource and support their goals. Other hub churches in the Dakotas could host workshops and/or pairs of Seed Planters could visit individual churches as requested.

Recruiting a Conference Level Green Team

The Extending Missional Impact Link (of which I am co-chair) is sponsoring a **resolution** to implement the General Conference mandate that all annual conferences have a **Caretaker of God’s Creation (CGC)** and **Conference Creation Care/Justice (Green) Team (CGT)**.

So another component of my Earthkeeper’s project is to identify individuals willing to serve on a conference level Green Team to assist the Caretaker of God’s Creation in developing, resourcing, promoting and implementing a plan to help local churches in the Dakotas to engage more in Creation Care and/or establish Green Teams.

A conference Green Team needs committed volunteers who are skilled in community organizing, communications and IT, motivational speaking, and fundraising. A number of persons have expressed a willingness to be part of a CGT to work alongside the CGC.

- **Tanner Clark**, director of Storm Mountain Camp, is especially committed to educating youth who attend the camp. Earth Day (first observed in 1970) is major fund raising event for improvement projects at the camp, and Tanner works hard to help campers experience and become more aware of God’s Creation.
- **Cindy Heidelberg-Coates** is a Deacon at Sioux Falls Wesley and the executive director of Groundworks Connect, an educational and experiential project in the Sioux Falls area that connects young people to agriculture and creation.
- **Dan Johnson**, lay member of Yankton First UMC, organized a Green Team in his church in 2023. Not only has the team tackled energy conservation and savings in

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their building, but they have expanded awareness into the community and advocated for Creation Care and sustainable farming.

- **Rodney Knock** is the pastor of Hilltop UMC in Sioux Falls which has a strong mission-work oriented ethos.
- **Charlie Moore** is the lead pastor of Sunnycrest UMC in Sioux Falls which has integrated care of creation and environmental stewardship with basic discipleship as believers in Jesus Christ.
- **Jackie Owen** is Tanner Clark's mother, and member of Rapid Valley UMC. She has extensive experience and knowledge of adult and community education as well as working with youth at camp.
- **Marty Toepke-Floyd** (author) is the Senior Pastor of Jamestown First UMC and has led workshops on Climate Justice at Mission u for the United Women in Faith.
- **Cory Thrall** is the lead pastor at Legacy UMC in Bismarck would like to see his church to be strategic in its vision for the future of their building and operations, and spreading that vision to other churches. The expanded use of solar panels on the Legacy church and fair-trade coffee are two goals which the church could take.
- **Mark Turner** is serving three small churches in north central North Dakota, and has been a missionary in Africa, Brazil and Chile. He has emphasized that being a disciple of Jesus Christ means we are global citizens.

Financial Cost of Caretaker for God's Creation and Conference Green Team

Here is a proposed budget for implementing the Resolution and funding a CGC position assisted by a CGT:

▪ Annual Stipend for CGC	\$5,000	(40 hours/month)
▪ Mileage, Meals and Office materials	1,000	
▪ Materials for Workshops	500	
▪ Grants to start new Green Teams	2,500	(five \$500 grants)
▪ Mileage & Meals for volunteer team	<u>500</u>	
Total annual budget	\$9,500	

Many thanks to the people who responded to the survey questions and to the churches who are already engaged in various Creation Care and Climate Justice ministries. Thank you also to the Earthkeepers training team at the Board of

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