



## **Engage: Youth Ministry & Contemporary Issues**

### **Climate Change and the Church**

#### **Introduction:**

Hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, fires, melting ice caps, crop failures, and record heat indexes are a few of the natural disasters grabbing headlines and stirring continued conversation about climate change. Faith communities are often quick to respond in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, but faithful conversations about the Church's role and responsibility in the face of climate change are tragically few and far between.

Yet, the very first chapters of Scripture are unequivocal about the call for God's people to tend the earth. How then do we honor this ancient call, with our present crisis and future fears? How do we support the young people in our care as they reckon with what climate change means for them now and will mean for their futures? In this issue of [Engage](#), we tackle the topic of climate change from some of today's prophetic voices that are reminding us of the call to tend and attend to God's creation.

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## Articles

### **Response: Brooks Berndt** *Youth as Climate Prophets*

“I am looking forward to having the world see the incredible power my generation holds.”  
--Victoria Barrett, one of 21 youth suing the federal government over climate change

When it comes to the damage done to our climate, no voice is as morally powerful and persuasive as that of youth. Our youth are the ones who will inherit the consequences of our society’s action or inaction in addressing the climate emergency presently faced. It is one thing for older generations to become ideological adherents of climate denialism or skepticism. It is another thing for those older generations to hear directly from a child or grandchild about the threats faced. As a result, one of the most important acts a pastor or youth minister can take to address our climate is to hand over the microphone and the pulpit to a climate prophet of the younger generation.

To be honest, it is not just climate deniers who need to hear from youthful climate prophets. It is also climate realists—those with at least a basic understanding of the causes and consequences of climate change. It has become increasingly evident to me that even among this group there can be a profound lack of the moral urgency required to take necessary immediate actions. However, a sense of urgency quickly arises when you realize some of those you love the most will be the most affected.

The young climate prophets of today possess not only a moral power but also a theological power, a sense of calling. The story of Jeremiah’s call serves as a relevant touchstone in this regard. As some translations have it, Jeremiah was called as a “youth,” and the task before him was daunting. It involved challenging the political and religious powers of his time: the kings, princes, and priests along with the broader populace ([Jeremiah 1:18](#)).

Similar to Moses, Jeremiah responds to his call with doubt and objection. He believes himself unfit for the task. He does not “know how to speak” because he is “only a youth” ([Jeremiah 1:6](#)). Jeremiah has internalized the belittling underestimation of youth that adults commonly hold. Yet, God assures Jeremiah of a steadfast, delivering presence that will ultimately turn him into “a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls” in the face of the powerful ([Jeremiah 1:18](#)).

The youth of today face a daunting task in confronting those in power. Nothing exemplifies this more than the 21 youth in the landmark case known as [Juliana v. U.S.](#) These youth ranging in age from 10 to 21 have taken the federal government to court for violating their generation’s constitutional rights to life, liberty, and property, while also failing to protect essential public trust resources. Power in this case is not a mere abstraction. The President of the United States is a defendant.

In response to the courage of the youth plaintiffs, 19 faith organizations have called for more than a thousand sermons preached in solidarity. Youth are especially encouraged to preach. The campaign is called [“Justice for #EachGeneration.”](#) and it stakes out [a moral ground not often considered](#). In contrast to a cultural outlook found in the Bible that consistently thinks in terms of a continuum of generations stretching from the past to the future, our current society tends to myopically focus on the present.

Among people of faith, however, a countercultural ethic is emerging. Notably, in [his encyclical on climate change](#), Pope Francis declared “[i]ntergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us.” Not surprisingly, the pope’s stance on climate is cited as a reason for his [popularity among youth](#).

In opening the pulpit to young climate prophets, churches can forge a stronger connection to the younger generation. More importantly, churches can discover their own sense of calling in addressing a matter of utmost urgency.

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**Rev. Dr. Brooks Berndt** serves as the [Minister for Environmental Justice for the United Church of Christ](#). Prior to this, Berndt served for eight years as the pastor of First Congregational UCC in Vancouver, Washington. While there, he became active in various environmental campaigns including a successful effort to transition the state of Washington away from its only coal plant as well as a campaign to prevent the establishment of the largest oil terminal in the country in Vancouver. During his time as pastor, Berndt published his first book [Sounding the Trumpet: How Churches Can Answer God’s Call to Justice](#). It was co-authored with the Rev. Dr. J. Alfred Smith, Sr., a pastor at Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, California. Scholar Cornel West described the book as “a masterpiece...full of deep spiritual truths.”

**Response: Jessica Rigel & Jacqueline Lapsley**  
*An Ethic of Love for Creation*

Throughout Scripture, humanity is repeatedly reminded that God rejoices in creation; therefore, caring for creation serves God. This orientation to the care of creation begins in Genesis, where God creates humanity to serve and preserve the garden ([2:15](#)), and is reflected repeatedly through the Psalms (e.g., [8](#), [19](#), [24](#), [95](#), [104](#)). [Leviticus 25:23-24](#) goes so far as to dictate that humanity “shall provide for the redemption of the land.” Throughout the works of the prophets, judgment is envisioned as the destruction of creation ([Haggai 1:10-11](#), [Jer. 4:23-26](#), etc.), and justice is brought about through the revitalization of creation ([Haggai 2:18-19](#), [Amos 9:14](#), [Jer. 29:6-8](#), [Isaiah 58:11-12](#), etc.).

This theological conviction is continued in the New Testament, where the groans of creation and the groans of humanity are symbiotically linked ([Romans 8:22-23](#)). Ignoring the needs of creation undermines Christ’s intention that we “have life, and have it abundantly” ([John 10:10](#)), and rejects Christ’s mandate to “[g]o into all the world and preach the gospel to *all* creation” ([Mark 16:15](#), emphasis ours). In neglecting a healthy relationship with God’s created order, humanity has caused environmental problems with consequences that are fast spinning out of control.

Youth today are facing a climate crisis that, in the words of physicist and climate expert [Joseph Romm](#), Senior Fellow at the [Center for American Progress](#), “will have a bigger impact on...all of humanity than the Internet.”<sup>1</sup> For too long, our hubris—our sinful arrogance—has marked our relationship with creation. We can clone animals, we can genetically modify plant species, and we can kill insects en masse. Our industrialized agricultural system has largely freed us—though not all of us—from fear of famine and hunger, but it has allowed us to neglect our God-given sense of limitation. We now face a global climate crisis, increased desertification, pests that have become immune to pesticides, poisoning of our rivers and oceans, rising tides, and mass extinction.

These injustices inflicted on God’s beloved creation not only affect the natural world, but also the human community embedded within that creation. A shifting climate amplifies justice issues many youth in our churches already care about, including hunger, thirst, the refugee crisis, consumerism and capitalist empire, the spread of disease, and mass incarceration—incidentally, each of which Jesus himself touches on in [Matthew 25:34-35](#). According to OxFam’s media briefing, “[Hot and hungry – how to stop climate change derailing the fight against hunger](#),” climate change disproportionately affects women, who make up a large percentage of the developing world’s agricultural workforce, and who often play an essential role in the production

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Romm, [Climate Change: What Everyone Needs to Know](#). (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

and preparation of food. And of course, climate change is responsible for the increased disease, habitat loss, and impending extinction of many animal species, including bats, moose, starfish, squirrels, butterflies, pikas, and many others.<sup>2</sup>

If youth wish to spread Christ’s message of love and reconciliation, they must help the Church to remember that we are woven into God’s creation by bonds of interdependence, just as we, with the rest of creation, are dependent on God. Youth must be the agents of change the Church needs, empowering us to reinterpret the words “dominion” ([Gen. 1:26](#)) and “subdue” ([Gen. 1:28](#)) that have been misunderstood in ways that distort our relationship with the natural order.

In the context in which Genesis was written, these words would have been understood in reference to agricultural life, in which human beings exercised authority over animals principally by shepherding them. In parallel fashion, God (in the New Testament, God in Christ) is depicted as a shepherd to human beings. Thus, humanity is awarded dominance over creation only as Jesus Christ is awarded dominance over humanity, with the understanding that our power is not to be used to abuse or exploit. If we wield our power by subjecting the rest of creation to our own selfish desires, we miss the point of having that power. Humanity is to attest to God’s goodness by demonstrating that we are worthy of God’s trust—that we are worthy of the opportunity to exercise power as God exercises power, not as tyrants or despots, but as models of grace and love.

How different a world would it be if we truly acted like shepherds for *the cosmos*? If we fed *the land* and provided sustenance *for the seas*? What would the world look like if we fell in love with creation, not out of fear—not because some political pundit told us it was morally right, not out of a sense of obligation or guilt, but because we follow a God—our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer—who *invites* us to love what God loves, and to celebrate and name as good what God celebrates and names as good.

For further reference, see:

Naomi Klein, [This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate](#). (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

Patricia K Tull, [Inhabiting Eden: Christians, the Bible, and the Ecological Crisis](#). (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> Katharine Hayhoe and Andrew Farley, [A Climate for Change: Global Warming Facts for Faith-Based Decisions](#). (New York: FaithWords, 2009).

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**Response: Ruth Ivory-Moore**  
*Advocating for Care of Creation*

“... [H]uman dominion over the rest of creation is to be an exercise of kingship that reflects God’s own kingdom. The image of God is not a license for arrogant abuse, but a pattern that commits us to [a] humble reflection of the character of God.”<sup>3</sup> -Christopher J. H. Wright

The Bible opens with the creation in Genesis 1: God creating the heavens and the earth; creating all the living things; making human beings in God’s own image; and charging humans to have dominion over all creation. “It is not that having dominion is what constitutes the image of God, but rather exercising dominion is what being made in God’s image enables and entitles us to do.”<sup>4</sup> Unlike other living things in creation, God elevated humankind over all other creatures by making them in God’s image and entrusting only human beings to have dominion on the earth.

Being created in God’s image carries with it the responsibility of acting in a manner that shows the character of God’s love for all of creation. A reflection of God’s character embodies traits that include love, mercy, care, and justice. We know character “produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” ([Romans 5:4b-5](#)). Human beings are equipped and poised to be advocates for all of creation.

God not only equips us physically and mentally to be advocates, but God provides the perfect example in Jesus Christ ([1 John 2:1](#)). Just as Christ showed his love for all of humankind by being the means of reconciliation with God, humankind similarly must assume its responsibility for caring for all of creation by advocating for the protection and care of all. But historically, human beings’ quest for economic prosperity has led not to protection and care, but to harm instead.

The costs for prosperity are great and result in unintended consequences that include environmental degradation or destruction of the earth, which impacts all of creation. Future generations are at risk of living in a world that is much different from what we know today. Our waters, our land, and our air are polluted. We are seeing the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere that create a global warming effect resulting in [changes to our climate](#). Increased temperatures are causing more frequent, severe, and intense weather events such as hurricanes, droughts, floods, and wildfires. The changing climate is also causing warming ocean waters and rising sea levels that are eroding coastlines.

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, [The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission](#). (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 51.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Overwhelmingly, scientists agree that human activity is the primary cause of the destruction being witnessed on earth. The international body for assessing the science related to climate change, the [International Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC), released [a 2014 report](#) that states, “[h]uman influence on the climate system is clear, and recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are the highest in history. Recent climate changes have had widespread impacts on human and natural systems.” Likewise, in November 2017, the Trump Administration released [The Climate Science Report Fourth National Climate Assessment](#), which concluded that “based on extensive evidence, it is extremely likely that **human activities, especially emissions of greenhouse gases, are the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century.** For the warming over the last century, there is no convincing alternative explanation supported by the extent of the observational evidence.”

The negative impacts of climate change and pollution are shouldered disproportionately by the most vulnerable—the same communities who have contributed the least to these changes and who are not equipped to implement response measures or to build resilience. Everyone and everything has the right to live or exist in a world free of pollution, to have access to clean water and air, and be void of global warming effects. The case for advocating for the care of all creation is apparent.

[ELCA Advocacy](#) “works for change in public policy based on the experience of Christian ministries, programs, and projects around the world and in communities across the United States. Our faith calls us to learn more and speak out on issues affecting our vulnerable neighbors and the forces threatening creation.”

Advocacy relies on the tools provided by God’s infinite and creative wisdom ([Proverb 2:6](#)).

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**Response: Emma Sleeth Davis**  
***The Faithfulness of Doing Your Part***

When I was a junior in college, my brother's girlfriend—now wife—Val and I spent four months volunteering at a palliative care center in southern India. Because we were working with the chronically and terminally ill in an overpopulated city, we saw first-hand how disregard for the environment has a direct negative effect, especially on those who have been impoverished. We had so many patients who knew their illnesses were a direct result of their working and living conditions, but they didn't have the resources to improve their situation. For our own health, Val and I were not allowed to go in the ocean. We weren't even supposed to brush our teeth with water from the tap. The one time we did drink city water when we were visiting in Delhi, we both got sick, and the air made things even worse. In fact, the [World Health Organization](#) estimates that one in eight deaths globally is due to air pollution.

It's easy to think that we don't have the same problems in the U.S., but that's not actually true. India's population density is nine times ours, which makes it easier to see pollution, but we still have environmental problems in America. Increases in cancer, asthma, and allergies have all been linked to environmental factors.

So what exactly is the appropriate relationship for Christians to have with the environment? I think we can break it down into three categories: appreciation, conservation, and restoration.

At the core of creation care is an appreciation of the amazing world that God created. Christians today are sometimes wary—understandably so—of environmentalism because they don't want to stray from orthodoxy into some kind of New Age pantheism. I get that—I'm not into nature worship either. What I am interested in is a return to a biblical relationship with creation. Knowing God through nature has been a common theme throughout Christian history. The early church father Irenaeus said "[t]he initial step for a soul to come to knowledge of God is contemplation of nature." Martin Luther said that "God writes the Gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars." Anne Frank wrote in her famous diary, "[t]he best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet, alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature... I firmly believe that nature brings solace in all troubles."

Instead of following this advice, our generation is sitting in front of screens. Most Americans spend a full year of their lives watching television ads. Not TV in general—just commercials. If you have an average lifespan and watch TV the average amount, you will spend approximately a decade of your life watching TV. That's not even including the time we spend surfing the internet, on our smartphones, or playing video games. When you start adding all that time

up...well, suffice it to say, we spend a lot more of our time in artificial worlds fashioned by humans than the one God created and which reminds us that we are all dependent upon God for our very existence.

The second aspect of creation care is conservation. Being a conscious steward of resources is something that's practicable in every aspect of life. For me, that means living in a small apartment, furnishing it with all used or hand-me-down furniture, turning down the heat in the winter, and using a fan instead of the air conditioning in the summer. My husband Zach and I clean our dishes by hand, don't own a TV, and use all compact florescent or LED lightbulbs. We replaced our showerhead with a low-flow version and use cloth napkins. I walk to work. Zach grows a lot of our own food, eliminating the need for commercial fertilizers, transportation, and disposable packaging.

The third aspect of creation care is restoration. That's why, at every place my family has ever lived, we've planted trees. Whenever I go back and visit places I grew up, everything looks smaller than I remember—except for the trees, some of which I knew as saplings but are now big enough to climb.

Restoring creation can take several forms. It can be planting trees, but it can also be picking up trash by the side of the road, enriching depleted soil with compost, or rehabilitating a pond. Or you can care for creation by conserving. Use recycled paper, carpool, and don't put more on your plate than you can eat. Bring your own fabric bags when you go shopping. Set your computer to energy-saving mode. Educate yourself about what can be recycled in your town. Take shorter showers. Your participation doesn't have to be big or complicated, but I promise you—it's important.

If I could ask one thing of you, it would be this: take a few minutes today to think about what you can do to appreciate, conserve, and restore God's creation. Jot down a few changes in your daily actions you'd like to make, and put them somewhere you'll see regularly. Show God your appreciation for the great gift of creation that has been given to all of us to steward.

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**Response: Shantha Ready Alonso & Rebecca Barnes**  
***Christian Faith and Justice for God's Creation***

How does your belief in God and your Christian faith ask you to behave in the world? Are there things that you believe you are called as a Christian to do in your daily life, even if they are hard? If loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind is something you try to do, how do you demonstrate that to others?

As we look in Scripture and in Christian tradition, we realize that one part of loving others is knowing that we are part and parcel of the entire creation that God has made. From the beginning, humans have been connected to the other species and natural systems of this earth, and God calls it all “very good.”

It *is* good, and a huge blessing, that we get to be part of this amazing, miraculous creation! Because we are grateful to God, we live responsively and faithfully through daily interactions with the world around us. In fact, we remember that God’s instruction in Genesis 2, after creating Adam, is that humans are given an awesome responsibility and relationship with God’s creation: humanity is called to “till and keep the earth.”

In a time when politics and religion seem to be polarized, Christian approaches to justice and care for God’s creation can be misunderstood. Taking our relationship with God’s creation seriously is neither an overlay of some political agenda nor environmentalist propaganda; it is deeply Christian. And, the reverse misunderstanding is likewise untrue. Christians are not some shallow, self-centered group that only care about spiritual wellbeing or a heavenly afterlife; we are immersed in the material world because God puts us here and calls us to interact, relate, and care for it. Christians care for the earth and everything therein *because* of our faith, not in spite of it.

Now, we have to be honest. In various times throughout history, Christian traditions have forgotten a lot or failed to emphasize the rich diversity of scriptural mandates we have inherited—including this original vocation to serve and preserve the earth. Also, we are humans, so we know that we often fall short. We Christians have a lot to lament and confess when it comes to the ways greed and pride have harmed our relationship to the creation God loves.

We actually have a beautiful place to begin again, however. Because we are people of faith, we know that we can be forgiven and start anew, with Christ beside us. We believe that it is right and good to be guided by moral mandates, that our basic instruction to love and care for others is going to teach us anew how to love and care for the earth and all in it.

Eco-justice is a phrase that Presbyterian campus minister Bill Gibson used to describe working for the “wellbeing of all people on a thriving earth.” Building off of the term eco-justice, “creation justice” is a phrase Christians have more recently started to use to emphasize our

gratitude to our Creator who wants all of creation—human and nonhuman—to thrive. Doesn't that sound like God's vision for us? A vision of a world where all people are well and where the earth and all its systems thrive.

Rooted in love of neighbor and an ethic of creation justice, it is deeply Christian to strive for the day when communities that have been made economically poor and communities of color will no longer bear the disproportionate burden of toxic waste, polluted air and water, and lack of access to healthy food grown on healthy land. When we live into an ethic of creation justice, we rightly share the gifts of God's creation with personal transportation, food, and energy choices that empower our neighbors and are sustainable for our communities. We imagine a future with renewable energy, local healthy food systems, and employment that is safe for both the worker and the worker's environment.

[Creation Justice Ministries](#) is an organization guided by a wide variety of Christian denominations and communions' programs that work to build a better world for all people and all creation. We believe it is deeply Christian to work for eco-justice. Together, we talk about how our Christian traditions and theologies, all informed and guided by scripture, call us to care about climate change, environmental racism, contaminated water, more rightly sharing wild places and access to land, and so much more. We work together to create actions for hope, to spread love, and to ask for justice where we witness injustice. We invite all Christians who feel this call to love others as Christ loves us to join us as we seek to follow the vocation of serving and preserving the beautiful creation that God made, while showing love for our neighbors.

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*Shantha Ready Alonso has served as Executive Director of [Creation Justice Ministries](#) since 2015. Creation Justice Ministries' mission is to educate, equip and mobilize communions and denominations, congregations, and individuals to protect, restore, and rightly share God's creation. Creation Justice Ministries' membership includes Baptist, Historically Black, Orthodox, Peace, and Mainline Protestant traditions. Through its 38 denominational and communion members, Creation Justice Ministries serves about 100,000 churches and 45 million people in the United States. Based on the priorities of its members, with a particular concern for people who are most vulnerable and marginalized, Creation Justice Ministries provides collaborative opportunities to build ecumenical community, guides people of faith and faith communities towards eco-justice transformations, and raises a collective witness in the public arena echoing Christ's call for just relationships among all of creation.*

*Rev. Rebecca Barnes became the Coordinator of the [Presbyterian Hunger Program](#) (PHP) after serving for 5 years as the Associate for [Environmental Ministries](#). Rebecca coordinates and supports the PHP national, international, lifestyle simplicity, and environmental programs that work to alleviate hunger and eliminate its causes—in the United States and around the*

*world. Rebecca is a graduate of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary where she earned an M.Div. and M.A. in Religion in 2011, with a thesis titled: “A Fuller Experience of God’s Grace: How the Sacraments Invite Us to Relationship with, and Care for, the Earth.” While in seminary, she authored [50 Ways to Help Save the Earth: How You and Your Church Can Help Make a Difference](#). She serves as the board president of Creation Justice Ministries.*

**Response: David Radcliff**  
*Engaging Creation Like Jesus*

Our work at [New Community Project](#) revolves around justice, creation care, and experiential learning—and climate change is directly related to each of these. Many young people can connect to just about any issue that deals with these three aspects of our life and faith.

Climate change is a justice issue. We were on a Learning Tour to East Africa in May, where they were still waiting for the March rains. For us, a dry spell is an inconvenience, but for these residents there is much more at stake—if their corn doesn't grow, their children don't grow. And these are not the people causing climate change. In fact, their CO2 footprint is half a ton per person per year while the average American's totals 20 tons when you add the emissions from our reliance on Chinese manufacturing.

On another Learning Tour, we traveled to the low-lying delta areas of Myanmar, which is where the majority of the country's rice is grown. As global sea levels rise, the country will face a slow-motion tsunami flooding and annihilating the land, resulting in a humanitarian disaster. Again, the Burmese don't bear the blame for melting glaciers, and yet they will be among the first to face the dire consequences. That is why this is a justice issue.

A ranger at [Cedar Breaks National Monument](#) in Utah once told us about the [pika](#), which are small furry mammals that live under rocks for protection from predators. However, these animals now must face additional hurdles to their existence, as they have had to move up the mountains in order to seek cooler climates. The ranger told us, "They have thick fur and an internal thermostat, and if it regularly gets over 78 degrees, they tend to 'splode." I'm fairly sure he meant that their blood boils, but no matter the exact cause, the event can't be pretty. Another animal being affected in this region are the moose along the upper tier of the contiguous U.S. These animals are currently under assault from ticks due to winters not being cold enough to control tick populations. One moose can host 150,000 ticks, which literally sucks the life out of the animal.

In my experience, youth are typically appalled by these travesties against creation, and their innate sense of fairness helps them recognize that climate change is a sin against nature. They understand the Old Testament prophets who railed against those who harmed or failed to defend the vulnerable. The [parable of the rich man and Lazarus](#) scares their socks off. God has commanded us to "till and keep" creation, and youth can tell how much better we've been at the former. We must remember that God created *adam* from the *adamah*—humans from the humus. Thus, as humus goes, so goes humans. If we don't tend creation, it cannot tend us.

Since climate change can be contentious (although I find much less so among young people), one way to approach it is after the manner of Jesus. He often acted publicly in a way that invited people to choose how they would accept and relate to him. He also encountered people in a direct and personal way, such as the woman at the well and little Zaccheus. This kind of engagement had the power to change those around him.

This can work for us as well as we seek to engage people regarding our changing climate. At NCP, we tell stories and show pictures to school and church groups; we take Learning Tour groups of all ages to the Arctic, East Africa, or the Dominican Republic to see the effects of climate change and to hear from those affected; we have Sustainable Living Centers where climate change is practically, politically, and prophetically addressed. We want people to feel the urgency via their own senses and souls. We believe that youth are still capable of feeling this urgency—not yet being so far in that they can't see out. These experiences not only have the power to change us, but we hope they will change our world as well.

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*David Radcliff is director of the [New Community Project](#), a faith-grounded nonprofit with a big goal: to change the world. He is a member of the Church of the Brethren and has M.Div. and D.Min. (Peace Studies) degrees from Bethany Theological Seminary. David speaks some 150 times per year in schools, colleges, and congregations on issues of justice, earth care, and transformation. He lives in Blue Ridge, Virginia, where he gets around by bicycle.*

**Response: Chris Elisara**  
*Cultivating Love for Creation*

When a youth minister decides “the youth ministry is going to address the issue of climate change,” that appears to be a simple, straightforward proposition, but it’s often not. The first knot to think through is: “What does *address* mean when applied to climate change?” The answer to that question also depends—at least in part—on what climate change is, how it comes about, how it is perpetuated, and how it can be stopped, if at all. The second and most important knot to think through is: “Why make the effort?” The answers to these questions are interconnected, but to start, let me share some of my thoughts regarding climate change.

I’ve learned that it’s important not to make the assumption that Christian young people in the U.S. are going to accept that climate change is real based on the consensus of the scientific community that has examined and debated the evidence. Nor is it wise to assume that these young people will accept as fact that normal American lifestyles (the very ones that you and I and the young people in your care actually live) and the economy that goes hand-in-hand with this lifestyle are causing an exponential increase in greenhouse gases that are warming the planet. While the problem is that the extent of warming is causing deleterious effects to the ecological systems we depend on for life, and that this problem will continue for some time even if abated, it is still likely that in any youth group there will be a mix of some people who believe in anthropocentric climate change and some who do not. That’s probably a given. Therefore, if these are the starting conditions for group dynamics, then the question of how to address climate change with a divided youth group is very important.

In my opinion, there’s a serious need for youth ministers to help young people carefully work through their understanding of science, technology, and Christian faith. By doing so, youth ministers can help young people perceptively engage and constructively critique the pervasive “techno-scientism” driving today’s culture on the one hand, while also helping them sort through the so-called “war on science” issues, including climate change, on the other. A new way forward, or what I call “science wisdom,” would help considerably, but would probably not fully resolve the schisms on climate change that are likely present within youth ministries.

My suggestion is that youth ministers don’t make climate change *the* issue. Don’t avoid it completely—be honest with young people by acknowledging the existence of the climate change issue and the divided opinions on it—but don’t focus on climate change itself or the science for and against it. Instead, youth ministers have the theological opportunity to move young people to a whole new place by cultivating their deep love for God’s creation—a love for God’s creation as deep as God’s own love of creation. As Oliver O’Donovan reminds us in [\*Resurrection and Moral Order\*](#), God so loved his creation that he would not abandon it to sin’s destruction, but chose to “*vindicate*” the original order of creation by redeeming and renewing *all* of creation in

and through Christ's death and resurrection.<sup>5</sup>

If this sounds far afield from “addressing” climate change, James K.A. Smith's explanation of “liturgical anthropology” can help to bridge the gap. For, as Smith says, we “are defined by what we love, and because our loves and desires are primed and shaped by formative practices, a holistic model of Christian education—whether in the church, school, or university—needs to involve a *pedagogy of desire*.”<sup>6</sup> Smith is saying that what we *are* is what we *love*. Or to frame it another way, what we *do* is what we *desire*. Thus, to enable Christian young people to eventually *do* meaningful things to address climate change with all it challenges will require an abiding love for God's creation that's as deep and as serious as God's own love for creation. This love is what I believe to be the best starting place for intentionally addressing” climate change in youth ministry.

Even starting off with simple things would help develop this love for God's gift of creation, especially when these things are done regularly and consistently. Go on nature walks, canoe trips, bike rides, zoo visits, or even apple picking for a start, but do so with the Bible open so that God's word can speak into the experience, too. Make meals together with ingredients harvested in the garden, then eat these slow-cooked meals together, appreciating the fruit and beauty of creation, while also seeing creation in Scripture afresh and anew. Get outside and experience creation, and then get to know the names of trees, plants, birds, insects, fishes, mammals etc. that you encounter there. Learn about the watershed where you live and the ecological and food systems in your watershed. Just be intentional about crafting within your youth ministry a love for your special place in God's creation.<sup>7</sup>

This love will lead to action. To quote James K. A. Smith again: “A pedagogy of desire is a strategy for *formation*. Christian education, in this model, is not merely about dispensing Christian ideas or providing Christian ‘perspectives.’ It is more invasive than that, precisely because it is not just an education for observers or spectators—it should be an education for *actors*, for doers. A Christian education cannot be content to produce thinkers; it should aim to produce *agents*.”<sup>8</sup> This is exactly the method we've taken for over 20 years in the [Creation Care Study Program](#) (CCSP), which is an environmental studies program for North American undergraduate students in Belize or New Zealand. Our mission, written before we read Smith, is

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<sup>5</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, [Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics](#). (Grand Rapids, MI: Williams B. Eerdmans, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> James K.A. Smith, [Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works](#). (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Some recommendations for resources are: The [Wilderness Ministry Institute](#) (for ideas and resources for getting youth outside and experiencing creation); [Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice](#). Ed. by Ched Myers (2016) (for exploring the concept of watershed-based creation care practice); [Food and Faith](#), Norman Wirzba (2011) (for exploring theology and practice related to food, food systems, and creation care); [For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care](#) (2010) (for a good overarching book on creation care).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

“to educate students to be a part of, and agents for, God’s shalom particularly through understanding and caring for creation.”

Not every student has a transformative experience at CCSP, but most experience something like [Lindsay Mouw](#) who appeared last year on a CNN series called the “[ASPIREist](#),” centering on millennials who are changing the world. When she arrived at CCSP New Zealand, as she describes in the [Des Moines Register](#), “It was like they were talking a foreign language. Compost? Recycling? Grow your own food? It just seemed like a lot of extra effort,” she said. “I pushed back.” But during her semester of living, studying, and worshiping in the CCSP educational community she began to change; she began to see the connection to her faith. She read the Bible and kept coming back to [Genesis 2:15](#), which says that God put humans on the Earth to work it and care for it. The Hebrew word “shamar” stuck with her—it means “to protect.”

Effectively addressing climate change is going to take serious effort. It’s going to require national policies and enforceable international agreements and cooperation. Current business and economics norms won’t cut it and will have to change. We’ll need some technological breakthroughs, but there are no silver bullets. Our lifestyles and consumption patterns will have to change. In other words, it’s going to be a “[rough road to the future](#)” to borrow from James Lovelock.<sup>9</sup> If the next Christian generation is going to be equipped spiritually and practically to play their role in the forthcoming climate-led transition, they must first love the gift of God’s creation which will produce in them an abiding desire to be agents of God’s Kingdom “addressing climate change.”

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*Dr. Chris Elisara is the Founder and Executive Director of the [Creation Care Study Program](#) (CCSP), which serves about 25 institutions of the [Council for Christian Colleges and Universities](#) (CCCU). He is a long-term member of the [Congress for the New Urbanism](#) (CNU), where he served as a board member from 2013-2016, and led the recent effort to form the [CNU-Christian Caucus](#). As the Founder and Director of the [World Evangelical Alliance’s Creation Care Task Force](#), Chris represents evangelicals on creation care and urban issues at national and international venues including the [World Economic Forum](#) and [UN-Habitat](#), where he led an evangelical delegation to Habitat III in 2016. In 2017, under the auspices of the WEA, Chris convened the first ever [UN-Habitat World Urban Campaign Faith-Based Urban Thinkers Campus](#).*

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<sup>9</sup> James Lovelock, [A Rough Ride to the Future](#). (New York, NY: The Overlook Press, 2016).

**Response: Lyla June Johnstone**

*Untitled*

The borders between you and me  
Would disappear if you could only see  
That no amount of gold is worth a single heart beat  
And no human boundary can split the sea

Climate change is not a crisis of carbon dioxide in the sky  
It's a crisis of relationship and a crisis of our spirits inside  
Until we break down the borders that exist within the mind  
We won't be human beings, we'll be too busy picking sides

I don't believe in the lines drawn between cowboys and Indians  
I believe that our mother is the earth and we are all her children  
The racial borders built between black and white, women and men  
Are breaking humanity apart when we could be busy building

That doesn't mean ignore the past, or maintain the status quo  
It means raise up the valleys of poverty and make the mountains of wealth low  
It also doesn't mean writing off the oppressors and leaving them alone  
It means praying for their souls and believing they can grow

I woke up today to offer the world a rose  
To have the audacity to try in a world without hope  
Forgiveness is the key that opens paths to feeling  
I hand you the Jubilee and we commit ourselves to healing

The borders between you and me  
Would disappear if you could only see  
That no amount of gold is worth a single heart beat  
And no human boundary can split the sea

In the stories of my people, a woman once came  
The people were suffering and they knelt down to pray  
She gave them a key lesson about how to live again  
And how to heal the connection between women and men

The border between the genders that hurt and harm our hearts

Are healed when we place women at the center from the start  
Patriarchy sears our skin like a boundary between the souls  
And it hurts the men just like it has harmed millions of women untold

The men measure their worth in how much land they can own  
Just like they measure worth by how many women they can hold  
But women have a spirit, have a voice and needs, just like the sky is blue  
And as mother hearth has a spirit, has a voice and her own needs too

We heal our precious young men who wander without a compass  
By recognizing and healing from the past, witches drowned and mothers burned  
Until we train our young boys how to re-define their manhood  
We will be doomed to the same business that has ransacked the earth

The borders between you and me  
Would disappear if you could only see  
That no amount of gold is worth a single heart beat  
And no human boundary can split the sea

We think we are drawing real lines  
But the borders are in our minds  
I don't believe in America, Canada or Mexico  
I believe in the birds that fly and rivers that ebb and flow  
Right across those imaginary lines  
Drawn to benefit extractive colonial empire

Break down the window panes that separate you from the wind  
Break down the city walls that keep you from river bends  
We live inside of boxes that divorce us from the earth  
Kids can name more corporate logos than they can name seeds in the dirt  
Because they've caged in capitalism and watching movies on smartphones since birth

It's time for us to find a beautiful life beyond what we've known  
Winona LaDuke says one path is worn and one path is overgrown  
The path we've tread for 500 years has left us so mournful  
It's time to reimagine everything and question what we are taught is normal

The borders between our hearts and the truth of the earth's sanctity  
Are birthing us into a cage of in arrogance and insanity  
We are not God and the time has finally come

That we learn this the hard way and realize what we have done

The earth is so forgiving and we have another chance to try  
To be humble children of the earth and not masters of space and time  
Walk gently to the river's edge and cast your prayer upon the waters  
I believe in you and me to open our hearts and break down the borders!

The borders between you and me  
Would disappear if you could only see  
That no amount of gold is worth a single heart beat  
And no human boundary can split the sea

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*Lyla June Johnstone is a Fellow with the Original Caretakers Initiative at the [Center for Earth Ethics](#). She was raised in Taos, New Mexico and is a descendent of Diné (Navajo) and Tsétsêhéstâhese (Cheyenne) lineages. She is a co-founder of [The Taos Peace and Reconciliation Council](#), which works to heal intergenerational trauma and ethnic division in the northern New Mexico. She is a walker within the [Nihigaal Bee Iná Movement](#), and is the lead organizer of the [Black Hill Unity Concert](#). She is also the founder of [Regeneration Festival](#), an annual celebration of children that occurs in 13 countries around the world every September.*

*In 2012, she graduated with honors from Stanford University with a degree in environmental anthropology. She is a musician, public speaker and internationally recognized performance poet. Lyla June ultimately attributes any achievements to Creator who gave her the tools and resources she uses to serve humanity.*

## Discussion Questions

1. What is your theology of creation? How do you understand and articulate the role and responsibility of a Christian in caring for creation?
2. How is your congregation and/or youth ministry responding to the urgency of climate change? Is there a recognition of and investment in how climate change will affect your church's younger generations? How might you foster intergenerational conversation and action that leverages your collective resources toward making change?
3. The Bible is rich with descriptions, metaphors, stories, and lessons of the natural world, with many of these texts providing insight into God's self-revelation in and through creation. How might an understanding of the world as a way that God relates to us help us understand the climate crisis differently?
4. How do you interpret "dominion" in Genesis 1? Does your interpretation align with your understanding of who God is? How does Jesus enact the gift of having dominion over the earth?
5. What are some concrete steps or changes that you can make in your daily life to honor God's creation? How is your daily life reflecting your love for God's creation?
6. How do you understand the commandment to "love your neighbor" in light of the realities of climate change? How do you define who your neighbor is? How might a stranger or a person on the other side of the world also be your neighbor? And what might this mean in light of climate change?
7. Does the common expression, "[mother nature doesn't discriminate](#)," hold true in the face of climate change? Why do you think the effects of climate change are disproportionately being felt by particular communities and parts of the world and not as much elsewhere?
8. How might we approach issues like climate change if we understand the earth as a total, coherent entity consisting of land, water, and air instead of using man-made geopolitical borders and boundaries to define and divide God's creation?