

Caring for the Earth as God's People



Whether on Earth Day or any other day, caring for the earth is always timely. Any time we increase our commitment to caring for the earth we show gratitude for its riches to our gracious and generous God!

In the Beginning, God Gave Us Dominion Over the Earth

We possess incredible authority over creation that goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. We'll spend the first part of this program exploring the idea of dominion and what it means for us.

When everyone has gathered and settled in, begin by having a volunteer read this text from a Bible:

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

Genesis 1:28–31a

Discussion: How creation brings us joy, calms us, heals us and strikes us with wonder

Give the following invitation.

Discuss these three questions with one other person:

- **What parts of nature bring you the most joy?**
- **What parts of nature do you find most calming or healing?**

- **What do you think is the most awesome or wondrous thing about nature?**

Suggest that one person in each pair write down or mentally keep a list of what to share with the larger group.

Allow about five minutes for this discussion.

Collect the responses in the larger group. Focus on what elements of nature are mentioned and the sensations that are associated with them. For example: How many people mentioned the wilderness? oceans? wild animals? pets? the birds of the air? the Grand Canyon or the Great Lakes?

Encourage the participants to sit in silence for a few moments (perhaps as long as a minute) with the wonderful sensations that the elements of nature they have shared bring to their minds and hearts!

Then have another volunteer read the same Bible text again. This will lead into the next discussion.

Discussion: How God wants us to take care of the earth and all of nature

Give the following invitation.

Discuss these two questions with one other person:

- **What do you think this text says to God's people about caring for the earth?**
- **What do you think the word *dominion* means?**

Allow at least three minutes for this discussion.

Collect the responses in the larger group. See if there is some consensus about what caring for the earth means (there does not need to be). Note any differences in perspective that were shared. Then share the following:

Many people recognize our responsibility to care for the earth is an intimate and sacred trust. As Christians, we recognize that trust to be between God and us.

*The meaning of having dominion has kept biblical scholars writing profusely for generations. The Hebrew verb **radah**, translated into English as dominion, does not by itself give us an idea of **how***

How to Use This Resource

This program could be part of a half-day or full-day Earth Day observance or could kick off a more extended program. Typical ways people observe Earth Day include planting trees and gardens, recycling, swapping out light bulbs, using alternative energy sources, or picking up roadside trash. Your Women of the ELCA unit could spearhead activities like these congregation-wide and include men and women and all ages. You might even attract non-members!

Make sure you have all the supplies you need and understand the goal of each discussion. Read through the program completely a couple times so that you feel comfortable with it and will be able to weave in the points participants bring forward from their small group discussions. Keep track of time and know how you will end each discussion. The whole thing should take 60 minutes or less.

We recommend reading the ELCA's social statement on the environment as part of your preparation. Find it at www.elca.org under "What We Believe" and then "Social Statements."

Also note: There is a lot of information available online for Earth Day that you may wish to print out and distribute. If you find something that you want to use, please print your handouts on the backs of unused bulletins or the like as an illustration of how important it is for all of us to use fewer of the earth's resources!

This brief program begins with an extended reflection on a biblical text and proceeds with small group discussions.

Set up the room as a circle of chairs with a space for entry or exit after every fourth chair. This naturally provides small groups or groups of two for discussions.

*this dominion is to be exercised, and a thorough exegesis would require us to also look at the cultural context of **radah** at the time that scripture was written. So for the purpose of this brief program, we will suggest that the verb **radah**, taken in context with the verses that precede and follow it, conveys **a watching over** or **a securing of** the beauty and bounty God gave to humanity.*



Have someone read the passage from Genesis again, but this time with the preceding and following verses included: Genesis 1:26—2:1.

Then continue with the following:

We, God's people in this time and place, have heard how the earth is changing. And we have learned that much of this change has been caused by humanity. It has not all been good. We know that our impact on the earth and its resources has eliminated some of God's creatures and is threatening others.

Women of the ELCA agrees with and uplifts what the ELCA's statement on the environment says:

"As Lutheran Christians, we confess that both our witness to God's goodness in creation and our acceptance of caregiving responsibility have often been weak and uncertain."

The statement also says that we "have rebelled and disrupted creation," and it encourages us to "act interdependently and in solidarity with creation, [so that] we do justice."

It concludes that a "disrupted nature is a judgment on our unfaithfulness as stewards."

At this point, share with the group any additional pieces that you may have gleaned from reading the social statement.

This is also a good time to insert local or regional earth-care concerns.

Then continue with the following:

The official annual date for Earth Day is April 22. The day was founded by Senator Gaylord Nelson and first organized in 1970 to promote ecology and respect for all life on our planet, and to encourage awareness of the problems associated with air, water and soil pollution.

The world is in greater peril now than in 1970, but there is also unprecedented opportunity to build a new future. At the very least, Earth Day is a perfect day to reflect on the goodness and bounty of God's earth, consider what we can do to keep the earth healthy, and pray for our earth's healing.

Discussion: How this unit of Women of the ELCA, this congregation and this community can observe Earth Day

Give the following invitation.

Discuss these two questions with two or three other people:

- **What can you see our unit and congregation doing to observe Earth Day?**
- **How might we get the larger community involved?**

Allow five minutes for this discussion, but if a lot of good conversation is happening and the energy is high, allow for a couple minutes more.

Collect the responses in the larger group. Make note of similar responses. Also make connections between suggestions, ask clarifying questions, and allow others in the group to ask clarifying questions.

Listen well in order to get a sense of which responses have the most enthusiasm behind them. Ask the participants which ideas sound most feasible, and then ask if anyone would like to explore those options further.

Bring the discussion back to the topic by using the following statement or something similar. Be sure to incorporate any of the most popular ideas that have come out of the discussion!

Earth Day is a great time to learn about our planet and how to take care of it! Typical ways of observing Earth Day include planting trees, picking up roadside trash, conducting recycling and conservation programs, changing to compact fluorescent light bulbs, using real rather than paper plates for potlucks, and more! Some people sign petitions calling for stronger or more immediate actions to stop global warming and to reverse environmental destruction. Television networks usually air programs dealing with environmental issues around this time as well.

At this point, it is helpful to have more than one attractive idea. The following ideas provide food for thought and might even generate additional ideas; whether they are feasible may depend on your location and what municipal resources are available.



If any of the following have not come forth from the discussion, share them now.

- **Recycle old electronics** (including cell phones, which is an ongoing effort of Women of the ELCA; see www.womenoftheelca.org for details), aerosol cans, paints and paint thinners, old machine or car oil, toxic household items and cleaners.
- **Recycle aluminum cans**, plastic bottles, glass and paper. See how many huge bags you and your congregation can collect!
- **Begin a community vegetable garden.** Plan to donate half the food to a local food pantry and share the other half among those who work in the garden.
- **Beautify a park** or the church grounds by planting a native plant garden.
- **Plant trees.** Trees are the lungs of the earth. (Choose a tree indigenous to your area and growing zone.)
- **Clean up a local park**, beach or forest path. (Be sure to make all the necessary connections with local officials to access these areas; such a connection will also allow you to multiply your impact by encouraging others to join your efforts!)
- **Do an energy use inventory** at home and at church.

If your unit is ready to form a subcommittee to come up with a proposal for your entire congregation, there is a great deal of assistance available! The environmental working group has loads of helpful information at <http://www.ewg.org/>. Other resources can be found on the ELCA Web site under "Our Faith in Action." See the advocacy pages under "Justice."

Whatever your unit decides to do, their participation in this program can be applauded! Close the program with the following:

Caring for the earth is a bit like caring for our health. There are things we need to do that we are not crazy about, and some of those things are inconvenient. Who among us would like it if we didn't have to worry about getting proper nutrition and rest?

It is the same with caring for the earth as God's people! There are things that we do simply because we know they are good for the earth. We may grumble on our way to the recycling center for toxic waste, but we go to that recycling center as faithful stewards. We may sigh heavily as we make one more phone call to our municipality to ask that they recycle more than just paper and aluminum, but we make that call because we know it is the way to respond to God's good gift of this earth provided to all!

We do the things we know are beneficial even when we do not necessarily see the benefit. We do them in good faith, trusting that it makes a difference. And when we do them as a unit or congregation, they strengthen our unit, our congregation and our faith!

Closing Prayer

Holy Giver of Earth, we thank you for loving us into awareness and response! Holy Son of God, we thank you for living a model life of caring for all. Holy Spirit of God, we thank you for teaching us what we can do to help the earth heal from the harm that has already been done. We thank you for the ELCA and its social statement on the environment. And now we seek your inspiration and boldness to make changes and choices that show us as caring for creation as God's people. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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