



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

WHY LUTHERANS CARE FOR CREATION

Building on our foundations in the ongoing reformation of the church

The challenge of ongoing reformation. Lutherans embrace the idea that the Reformation did not end in the 16th century and that it should be ongoing and continual. Sometimes changes are incremental. At other times they can be dramatic. The church in each age is called to rise to the challenges posed by that era. In the 16th century, the chief issue that occupied Christians was the salvation of individuals. In our age, the most critical issue must surely be the fate of the Earth—the challenge to protect and restore God's creation from the devastations caused by human activities. Addressing this challenge requires a new reformation in our time.

For Christians, care of the Earth is not an “environmental cause.” Rather, it is central to our holy calling to treasure the Earth and to care for it as our common home, fully integrating creation-care into our love of God and neighbor. Without sacrificing the transformational effects of the 16th-century Reformation, we are called to embrace an eco-reformation that will re-examine and rethink how we read the Bible, how we can expand the scope of our theology, how we can reconfigure our personal vocation and our common ethic, how we worship, how we organize our church life together, and how we understand ourselves as creatures within creation as a whole.

This call to continuing reformation is for the whole church, not solely for the committed. Earth care is not an add-on. It is not just for those who happen to be interested in it. It is a call for all Christians to participate in this great work of our time.

Here are some reflections on key aspects of Lutheran theology and practice upon which we may build a creation-justice reformation.

God three in one. Biblical reflections and our confessional tradition and theological reflections have most often begun with creation, the foundation for all life. However, too often we have begun our theology with the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, which results in salvation being defined in terms of the individual (“Jesus died for me”) to the exclusion of the rest of creation, and creation is rendered secondary in our considerations. By contrast, when we begin with God's creation, we see the salvific work of Christ as redeeming and renewing all creation, indeed as “new creation.” And we experience the Holy Spirit as sustaining and moving creation toward its fulfillment. Moreover, creation, redemption and fulfillment are not sequential events but simultaneous activities expressing God's continuous creativity in many forms. The intimate relationships within the life of God as creator, redeemer and sustainer amid God's ongoing activity in creation provides a model of the relationships into which we are invited as we interact with one another, with all of nature and with God encountered within creation.

God the creator. Rooted in Scripture, Martin Luther's thought and the Lutheran confessional tradition, we affirm God as creator of all, with an incarnational theology that cherishes the ongoing presence and

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creative activity of God. Creation is not a single, Big-Bang event in the distant past, after which God steps back and occasionally intervenes. On the contrary, God invests continuously in every part of creation throughout the universe and throughout time. "The earth, O Lord, is full of your steadfast love" (Psalm 119:64). Luther considered that God is fully present in every grain and leaf, and by extension everywhere: "God is substantially present everywhere, in and through all creatures, in all their parts and places, so that the world is full of God and He fills all. ... His own divine essence can be in all creatures collectively and in each one individually more profoundly, more intimately, more present than the creature is in itself ..." (Luther WA: XXIII,134.34-23:136.36).

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God the renewer. The second person of the Trinity is the Word made flesh who redeems a fallen world. But the activity of the Son is much more than the restoration of what was lost. It also has a forward dimension as the emergence of "new creation" (Galatians 6:15). As Paul wrote: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Our affirmation is that, like God's ongoing work of creating, Christ, too, is present and active in, with and under all things.

God the sustainer. The Holy Spirit is present everywhere to sanctify all things, sustaining and leading creation toward fulfillment. As the Spirit's life-giving work builds up and unifies the human community with diverse gifts and many fruits, so also the Spirit infuses the Earth community as a whole with the gifts of sustainable growth, as creatures and all life forms strive to fulfill their purpose in a complex web of creation. Notwithstanding the widespread and thoroughgoing destruction of Earth in human and natural history, the Spirit lures all creation forward to a complex communion in which all may be able to thrive. And the Spirit calls, inspires and empowers humans to engender and to celebrate such a reality.

Seeing God everywhere. While the world is presented as secular, the Spirit provides us with the gift of "beholding" creation as holy ground, drenched with God's presence and abuzz with divine activity. God is not acting as a master-puppeteer nor intervening here and there from time to time. God, even though hidden, works always and everywhere for health and wholeness amid the independence and freedom of creation. As Word made flesh, Jesus reveals the nature and activity of God's presence in all creation as a force working for good in all things with grace and love. As we discern this presence, our amazement and awe move us to care for God's world.

With the assurance of God's presence in all things and a force of love behind all things, we are freed to see the world as it is without seeking to romanticize it or be blind to the evil and tragedy in life. We also welcome all that we can learn about our world through our strong reception of science, with openness to ecological realities and biological evolution. Science is so fundamental to understanding the environmental crisis and so significant as part of our human efforts to address it. We do not fear the truth about ourselves and our world. Indeed, it is part of God's relation to the world.

Human beings. Too often we have limited the Christian message to personal salvation: “Jesus died for my sins to be forgiven so I might go to heaven and be with God after I die.” When we adopt this fundamental but limited perspective, we see human life merely as a prelude to the afterlife instead of embracing a vocation to make the Earth a home for all. A narrow understanding of salvation obscures God’s investment in creation and leads humans to neglect Earth care.

In reality, the incarnational movement of God’s salvation is toward embodiment in this life. And human beings collectively are called to see the Earth as our home through time and to care for it for all generations. Recall that the Old Testament reflects a world without belief in life after death, a world in which God guides Israel and works among the nations to bring God’s purposes to fruition in this life. The focus is on this life. The Word became flesh and “lived” among us (John 1:14). Jesus prayed that God’s will be done “on earth” (Matthew 6:10). Paul affirms that we are waiting with eager longing for the redemption of creation (Romans 8:18-23). The book of Revelation envisions a world in which God comes to dwell on a renewed Earth in a new Jerusalem of justice and equity (Chapter 21) with all creatures thriving and singing their praises to God (5:13). The whole movement of God in our Scriptures is Earthward—becoming manifested in this life and showing human beings what it means to be truly human.

Often we have seen ourselves as creatures who live *on* the Earth rather than being embedded *in* it. We frequently have assumed that the *Earth belongs to us* instead of recognizing that *we belong to the Earth*. Changing our viewpoint is a critical transformation. It is a matter of shifting our thinking from seeing ourselves apart from and living upon the rest of nature to seeing ourselves as an integral part of creation in which our human fate is dependent upon the fate of the Earth as a whole. We used to read the Bible by interpreting salvation history as *human history*. Now we see that the Bible depicts salvation history as *creation history*. And the endpoint of salvation is the redemption and fulfillment of all life. And, of course, humans have a special role in caring for each other and all creation.

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Cross and resurrection. Lutherans view the cross as a lens through which we do our thinking about God and humans. Theologizing from the cross leads us to see God’s saving presence in the ugliest and most evil of human circumstances—Jesus rejected and scorned; stripped of all worldly wealth, status and power; tortured and executed in ignominious pain and humiliation; and dying. If God is saving us in and through this person and this event, then it is clear that neither human wealth, nor human status, nor human power are the identifying marks of salvation. Rather, salvation is exclusively the work of God, granted freely by grace and not based on our human efforts or achievements. This salvation in the cross also puts God in radical solidarity with suffering, including but not limited to human suffering. Furthermore, a theology of the cross also calls us to solidarity with the creation “groaning in labor pains” (Romans 8:22). As the author of Colossians says: “Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross” (1:20).

The resurrection affirms God’s presence in Jesus and in his life of self-giving. Yet it is more than a vindication; it is a glorious sign of new life. At his death, Jesus does not cease being the servant of the vulnerable, as he was throughout his ministry; he continues to manifest his risen presence through the Holy Spirit in and among all things. The resurrection of Jesus offers hope of new life, not only for the world to come but “here and now” in

this time and space. This hope is fragmentary in our experience, but it is real in itself and, for faith, ultimately victorious.

Creation-care worship. Traditionally, our worship has focused on our human relationship with God and our relationship with one another. In light of a theology of creation, our eco-reformation worship will also encompass God's relationship with all creation and our experience of God in nature. All worship ought to be carried out in solidarity *with* creation, for the Bible clearly calls for all creation to worship and for humans to join this choir of all creation. This would happen weekly as the community gathers to celebrate the seasonal changes of the liturgical year—in the call to worship, the confession and absolution, the breadth of the biblical story, the proclamation of the word, the hymns and prayers, the earthly sacraments, and the commission to serve and tend the Earth. Such worship invites us into transformative encounters with God in relation to the natural world—indeed with the entire expansive universe.

Sacraments. The sacraments of baptism and eucharist manifest God's healing presence in the natural elements of water, bread and wine. The elements do not change. Rather, the assurance of God's healing and forgiving presence through the words of promise affirms that the material world of creation is good and capable of bearing the divine to us. Through Christ's presence in the ordinary elements of grapes, grain and water, we are transformed to experience newness in, with and under every part of creation—and moved to treasure it. If we can see this presence with the eyes of faith in the sacraments, then we can also catch glimpses of it anywhere and everywhere. Such is the basis for our delight in and reverence for all creation.

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Justification. We are justified before God by grace alone. Justification is not the same concept as forgiveness. Forgiveness retains the law and remits our failure when we do not keep it. By contrast, being justified by God as *we are* eliminates laws and standards as a basis for acceptance before God. Because we are freed from anxiety about acceptance or salvation, we can then face our failures and our sins boldly without being in denial about anything. That is, humans are freed to acknowledge our complicity in personal and systemic sin against one another and against creation, to repent, and to offer ourselves in grateful service to the Earth community.

Justification addresses our alienation from one another and the rest of nature. Lutherans define sin as being turned in on ourselves as individuals, groups and as humanity as a whole—looking to secure, establish and aggrandize ourselves. In so doing, we use other people and the world around us by domination, exploitation and abuse. Justification by grace cracks open our need to secure ourselves because acceptance is already given. It is offered freely, restoring us to relationships of trust and thereby liberating us to care for others and for the natural world.

Vocation. Justification by God's grace frees us *from* the need to please God with pious or moral acts and

frees us *for* caring about all of the Earth community as an expression of our gratitude for God's love and grace. The Scriptures are clear about this. Our foundational biblical vocation is to be our "brother's [and sister's] keeper" (Genesis 4:9) and "to till it and keep" the Earth (Genesis 2:15). This human vocation is affirmed by Jesus who taught his disciples to be servants of all (Mark 9:35). We are especially called to care for the poor and the vulnerable among us and all around us, *including* endangered species and at-risk ecosystems. Our vocation to social, economic and ecological justice is an expression of fundamental purpose in life, both as individuals and as communities.

Liberated from a legalism that limits our vocation, we live in the freedom to address new situations, such as the ecological crises of our world. We do so not as dominators, exploiters or manipulators but as servants to the Earth community. We do so not out of fear, guilt, arrogance or anxiety but joyfully out of gratitude, grace and love.

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Ethics. The key tenet of Lutheran ethics has been faith-active-in-love (Galatians 5:6). We respond to God's love for us and we express our love for God by loving our neighbor. When we expand the definition of "neighbor" to include the plant and animal life that surrounds us and upon which we depend, we are called to embrace not only the "two kingdoms" of church and society but also the "kingdoms" of the plant, animal and geologic worlds—the entire orbit of our life.

This is an "integral ethic" (Pope Francis, [Our Common Home](#), pages 85-99) that brings together social justice and ecological justice, expressed in the term "creation justice." Creation justice calls us to see beyond our interpersonal behavior to encompass behavior in which we contribute, often unwittingly, to systemic evils that disadvantage and ruin the vulnerable of the world. We are called, for example, to overcome environmental racism against minority communities and against the global south (Africa, Central and Latin America, and most of Asia) because those who contribute least to our ecological problems often suffer first and foremost from those problems and have the least capacity to cope with ecological disasters. Such an ethical stance prevents us from building walls of affluence to protect ourselves and, at one and the same time, frees us to serve the most at-risk members of the Earth community.

Individuals and communities are called to examine themselves, their lifestyle and their impact on the world around them. We are invited to cultivate an intimate relationship with the natural world that deepens our gratitude and reverence. The challenge is to develop a discipline of love for all living things around us. This discipline will involve personal and group habits related to energy use, recycling and waste, water conservation, nontoxic products, lawn care, transportation and food choices, among other things. Our living spaces are connected to virtually all environmental problems. By attending to them with care, we are regularly reminded of global crises that others face, even if we do not. Ethically, our faith must be active in love.

The church. The congregation is where the faithful are nourished by the word, invigorated by the sacraments and sent to share this generative love with the creation. The very same energy that enables us to care for one another within our church community sends us out to build justice within the larger community and the natural

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world. The church—no matter what level—does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of the world. As such, the church addresses social discrimination and economic disparity intertwined with the ecological stresses and environmental crises we face in our world. So, no matter what the issue—whether racism or economic inequities, runoff of agricultural chemicals or climate change—the church is there.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). With a heritage rooted in the Bible and the Reformation, Lutherans have a rich history of service to the most vulnerable—the poor, the hungry, the elderly, the sick, the oppressed, the marginalized—through hospitals, homes and nursing facilities for the aged, social ministry agencies, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Lutheran Disaster Relief, the Malaria Campaign, Lutheran World Relief and more. In our day, more than ever before, we recognize that all these human conditions have ecological causes and dynamics as well. For example, the ELCA’s commitment to racial justice and economic justice recognizes that ecological degradation disproportionately devastates communities of color and the poor, both in the U.S. and globally. As a member church of the Lutheran World Federation, which holds the call to safeguard God’s creation as an anchoring mandate, we “confess the triune God, agree in the proclamation of the word of God …” and work toward the “alleviation of human need, promotion of peace and human rights, social and economic justice, care for God’s creation and sharing of resources” (See [Lutheran World Federation Resolutions and Statements on Climate](#).) All these commitments are crucial to the healing and restoration of the Earth community.

Ministries of advocacy. Driven by such commitments, Lutherans advocate for public laws and policies that protect the health and well-being of humans and all of life. Our ELCA social statements “Caring for Creation” and “Sustainable Livelihood for All” express our common commitment to advocate for equity and justice. The ELCA supports a full-time program director of environment and corporate social responsibility in Washington, D.C., who guides and carries out the church’s public witness on public policy related to God’s creation promoting principles of sustainability and resiliency.

The ministries of advocacy take on many forms. For example, in leading the ELCA’s efforts on corporate social responsibility (CSR), the tools utilized include screening of investments; shareholder advocacy; and community investing to work with corporations to advocate for just and dignified treatment, a sound environment and sustainable communities. As other branches of ELCA Advocacy work for changes in public policy, CSR works to guide behavior in the private sector toward the principles found in ELCA social teachings of sustainability, justice and dignity. Additionally, there are Lutheran public policy offices in many synods fostering creation justice (www.elca.org/advocacy). Individual members also participate in this advocacy. ELCA Advocacy calls on its people and congregations “to speak on behalf of this earth, its environment and natural resources, and its inhabitants.” The ELCA expects its rostered ministers to be “exemplary stewards of the Earth’s resources” and to “lead this church in the stewardship of God’s creation” (from “[Vision and Expectations](#)”). We need to embrace these mandates as central to our mission as a church.

Scholarship and education. For more than 50 years, Lutheran scholars have taken the lead in generating ecological theology, ethics, Bible study, worship and social commentary. ELCA colleges and seminaries have been in the forefront of ecological justice programs, career preparation in ecology, and Earth-friendly campuses that prepare Lutherans for environmental leadership in the church and in the world. Continuing education events for clergy and laity have highlighted creation care and creation justice.

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Caring for creation across the church. Many ELCA synods support “creation-care work groups” and make this work integral to their mission. Synodical and churchwide resolutions at assemblies call on the church to address environmental issues. Many Lutheran congregations incorporate Earth-care commitments into their worship, education, care of property, discipleship at home and work, and public witness. Individual members are enjoined to embrace a lifestyle that is sustainable for the Earth. Lutheran outdoor ministries have brought environmental concerns and positive experiences with nature to many youth as well as adults. ELCA churchwide offices, such as the Stewardship Office, provide resources for responsible approaches to our natural resources. The churchwide organization models environmental commitments and offers grants for environmental projects.

Organizations for earth-keeping. Lutheran grassroots organizations, such as Lutherans Restoring Creation, have provided programs and training opportunities for all quarters of the church and have made available extensive resources for creation-care worship throughout the year at letallcreationpraise.org. In addition, many Lutheran congregations participate in interdenominational organizations such as Interfaith Power and Light, Earth Ministry, GreenFaith, EcoFaith Recovery, and Faith in Place.

Collaboration. American Lutherans are no longer an immigrant church seeking to defend our identity in a challenging culture; nor any longer do we have the need to see ourselves as a reform movement within the larger church, important as that has been. Rather, we have shown through countless relationships with other denominations and religious communities that we are now called to love each other, learn from each other, build bridges and work together. This collaboration is most important in our collective efforts to care for the Earth. We are also eager to cooperate with secular as well as religious organizations in addressing the environmental issues of our time, along with the interrelated issues of racism, gender inequality, exploitation of the poor and inequality of wealth. We need to cooperate in order to do together what we cannot as effectively do separately and alone.

The Challenge. Lutherans are called to listen to the cry of the Earth along with the anguished cry of every broken soul so that we assume personal, ecclesial and public leadership in addressing both human justice and Earth justice together. Such comprehensive ecological justice is for everyone. It is foundational for our faith. This is how we love God in, with and under all creation—as neighbors of one another and of all living things on Earth and as kindred spirits with all things in the cosmos. The church calls upon Christians and all people of goodwill and conviction to participate in this great work of our time. Together we may be able to renew and re-form our church to embrace “the care and redemption of all that God has made.”

Visit ELCA.org/advocacy today to learn more and take action!

