Come with Me into the Fields: Inspiring Creation Ministry among Faith Communities

by Erin Lothes Biviano

Every year, the Venetian doge sails out into the lagoon from San Marco Square to throw a jeweled ring into the waters, ceremonially sealing the marriage of Venice with the sea. For centuries Venice’s fortunes rose and fell with the maritime commerce that surged through its customs house. Even today this ritual continues, honoring the city’s union with water through the visible symbols of the marriage ring. Today, Venice’s acqua alta rises and falls not only with its famous floods but also with the slow rise of sea levels as earth’s climate changes, the ocean expands, and glaciers melt. As the ring sinks through the waters, its historical meaning may seem quaintly outdated, but the power of the earth’s changing physical systems has never been more relevant to human wellbeing.

Powerful symbols command consciousness, direct a society’s attention upon the realities of their world, and—most critically—summon action. Like the Venetian tides, climate change is a dominant reality of our time. Yet arguably the central symbols of Christian faith are not yet consciously intertwined with this reality in the ways needed to command attention and summon appropriate action relevant to Christianity’s deep concerns for the poor.

Why is climate change relevant to Christian faith? There are many reasons, but the impact on the most vulnerable suffices. Climate change will alter growing seasons, crop yields, and storm patterns. It will also create surges of displaced peoples. These physical changes to the earth are clearly documented in the Fifth Assessment Report, the authoritative summary of the research of thousands of scientists worldwide sponsored by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change of the United Nations.

Ministers, pastoral leaders, and congregations thus have a critical role to play in advocating for the changes that will advance an abundant future, the abundance of the wedding feast recounted in Jesus’ parables of the reign of God (Matt 22:1-10; Luke 14:15-24). Yet how can ministers best lead their congregations to environmental awareness, concern, and action? In other words, how can they invite them to understand the critical relevance of environmental ministry and, in the words of the popular hymn of discipleship, “come with me into the field”?

Part of the problem is grasping the difficult science of climate change and communicating how it links to Christian concern for the poor. If people don’t recognize the changes facing the earth and their implications for the poor and the future, why should they act? If their cherished faith symbols are not perceived to imply creation care, how can

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religious concern embrace the earth and the poor? Alas, few ministers, pastors, or catechists are also atmospheric scientists. Often it seems only such an advanced scientific literacy can grasp the complexities involved. But scientific data must be accepted, just as we accept the authority of doctors, physical therapists, and GPS systems in our cars. Regardless of one's personal comfort with science, the authority of scientists is not a matter of faith, as is often implied by the question, "Do you believe in climate change?"\(^2\) The challenge for belief is not science but emphasizing the links between the state of the earth and religious teachings and symbols, a link that must be made to ensure Christianity's relevance as a moral force in society.

Helpfully, the Fifth Assessment Report is very clear that climate change is already having an impact on our planet. If you consult the executive summary, the short colored boxes spell out the main findings in clear language. For example:

> Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia. The atmosphere and ocean have warmed, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished, sea level has risen, and the concentrations of greenhouse gases have increased. The globally averaged combined land and ocean surface temperature data show a warming of 0.85°C.\(^3\)

The Fifth Assessment Report further states that “increases in the intensity and/or duration of drought in the twenty-first century is likely, and increased incidence and/or magnitude of extreme high sea level is very likely.” Additionally, the Fifth Assessment Report stresses that “evidence for human influence has grown since AR4. It is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century.”\(^4\)

The moral relevance of this data emerges in the link between this scientific assessment of the state of the planet and the gospel invitation to care for the poor. The Hebrew prophets insisted on care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in the land. Climate refugees are the new face of the stranger in the land, and they are increasing. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 36 million people were displaced by natural disasters in 2009. By 2050, this number will rise to at least 50 million by 2050 and will perhaps be as high as 200 million.\(^5\) United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization data going back to 1980 for crop yields in all major crop-growing regions of the world show that warming temperatures are reducing yields.\(^6\)

As a result of these impacts, a preferential option for the poor requires a preferential option for renewing creation, renewing energy systems, and renewing consumption patterns of all kinds (transit, conservation, efficiency, simplicity, eating local, etc.). In one sense, the solution is easy: we know what must be done. Society must radically reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that are warming the planet and do so now. The technological methods for achieving this already exist and can be brought to scale, as scientists have demonstrated.\(^7\) The challenge for all is deciding to enact these changes immediately on a radical scale.

\(^2\) Other strategies for discrediting climate science are detailed in Mary-Elena Carr and Madeleine Rubenstein, “Challenges to Authority; Understanding Critiques of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,” Union Seminary Quarterly Review 63, no. 1-2 (2011):48.
This essay does not argue that religions should take the ecological crisis seriously; all religious traditions have already argued this point themselves. Visit the website of the Forum on Religion and Ecology or the National Religious Partnership for the Environment to see statements from virtually all traditions. I invoke the power of religious symbols but do not review the many theological interpretations of classic symbols, texts, and rituals that have already been written in light of the ecological crisis. Fortunately, here too there is a wealth of literature.\(^8\) The question here is, given virtually every faith tradition's stated obligation to care for God's creation, how can Christians be effectively inspired to live out their own environmental faith missions?

I have previously argued that environmental spirituality among diverse American faith-based environmentalists includes scientific literacy, a commitment to social justice, a deep awareness of global interdependence, and faith in a "bigger God," who is concerned for all the communities of life.\(^9\) Here I will argue that scientific literacy and motivation are effectively created through group discussion in the kinds of trusted groups that congregations and faith communities exemplify.

What are the keys to productive discussion in faith communities? This article examines five key effects of group dynamics in three sections. First, I show how discussion engages the minds and hearts of members of faith communities by 1) renegotiating worldviews through the creation of new doctrinal syntheses and 2) integrating experiences in nature with spirituality. Then, building on minds and hearts attuned to climate change, discussion within faith communities further deepens and expands values by 3) reinforcing shared commitments to social justice and 4) expanding the definition of social justice to embrace creation care. Finally, faith-based environmentalists are further empowered by 5) the unifying power of worship and celebration and the ability of communal action to leverage the leadership of pioneers.

Here, then, is a guide to the vineyard of creation ministry so in need of laborers. It is a guide drawn from the accounts of many already working in this field, as my analysis is based upon focus group research among over 135 faith-based environmentalists. I spoke with participants chosen from mainstream congregational sustainability committees and some individuals. The Christian groups included Baptists (WA), three groups of Catholics (suburban NJ, urban NY, rural WA), two groups of Episcopalians (suburban and urban NJ), megachurch Christian Evangelicals (FL), Reformed Christians (NJ), two groups of Presbyterians/PCUSA (MD), Unitarian-Universalists (NJ), and southern ministers (NC).\(^10\)

My methodological objective was to engage environmental decision theory as well as theological analysis to understand the factors that motivate faith-based environmentalists. This essay represents analysis of a small portion of the data collected and the conclusions drawn from it and provides some of the insights shared by faith-based environmentalists. Come with them into the fields!

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\(^10\) The empirical research reported here was conducted while an Earth Institute Fellow, Columbia University (2007-2010), and was approved by the Columbia University Institutional Review Board. Discussions were transcribed and coded both inductively and deductively using NVivo 8 content analysis software (QSR Software, Melbourne) to compare and rank the responses.
Engaging the Mind and Heart

1. Renegotiating Worldviews: Creating New Doctrinal Syntheses

I began every focus group with the same question: “What is your favorite thing about your faith tradition?” While I was not surprised to hear that being part of a family-like community with shared values was a favorite characteristic, I was fascinated to find that freedom of inquiry was equally cherished. Almost half of all participants volunteered that free inquiry was their favorite thing about their community, equal to those who most appreciated finding a group that shared their values. Thus social bonds and free inquiry co-exist in a fascinating synergy. Understanding begins with questioning, and questioning begins with the freedom to ask. Because the trust in the community enabled free inquiry, committee members were able to examine and develop their attitudes about spirituality and the environment, exploring challenging new ideas productively.11

The synergy of social bonds and free inquiry enables a renegotiation of Christian world views toward new doctrinal syntheses that link core faith values and new environmental concerns. Through discussion, unfamiliar scientific ideas can be incorporated into existing worldviews, making space for understanding climate change and inspiring a faith-based moral response.

Social engagement is critical for the evolution of environmental awareness for Christians who identify with a community, listen to clergy, engage in congregational ministry, or otherwise acknowledge a social integration of their faith. For them, social engagement furthers congregational identity. Thus group identity—congregational identity—is important to faith-based environmentalists in a way that might not be true for those who are “spiritual but not religious.” The spiritual but not religious person may define her spiritual identity rather more flexibly. While there are certainly diversities of spiritual experience among the members of the same community, members of a group have at least some boundaries set by their faith and work out its evolving definition within the group. The synergy of freedom and community means that freedom is not sheer individualism. Persons are not defined by separation but by choosing their relationships and communities.

Thus for the faith-based environmentalists who felt a coherent worldview required environmental awareness, developing that environmentally conscious faith life entailed the social renegotiation of traditional identity. To maintain a sincere affiliation with their church and affirm the intensely felt moral claim of the environmental crisis, they renegotiated the definition of a green faith identity together.

Whether at a coffee hour among congregants generally unaware of new environmental ideas or at sustainability committee meetings, open conversations introduced new ideas about the earth and incorporated new environmental perspectives into belief systems. New ideas often disrupted stable worldviews. Just as the radical nature of climate change upsets basic assumptions about the stability of earth’s physical systems, so too the disruptions of climate change provoked religious questions about earth’s permanence, divine providence, the extent of human responsibility, and the global impact of one’s actions. But within safe, supportive groups, members could process these destabilizing new realities in relation to the shared values that brought members together.

Because committee members treasured the same long-standing values, revising them was not simple. Communally accepted beliefs were influential, whether they reflected religious, political, or family values. World views can be deeply rooted, multi-layered, and full of contradictory messages. A simple exhortation to “be green” and

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heed new doctrines will not adequately address this complexity. As a Presbyterian leader, Pat, admitted examining world views was very hard; she was “trying desperately to get a little more of a handle on it.” In the interpretation of Scripture she heard in her early life, exploiting the earth had been implicitly justified. Discussion in a Scripture study group teased out the environmental reverence in these ancient messages. Being part of the group made her go back and examine that. She ultimately revised the dominion ideas she perceived to be obliquely present in her mainstream Christian heritage. She confessed she was raised to think it was her earth to treat however she wished and remembered throwing trash out on the street. I asked if she felt that was overtly taught, that dominion over the earth was delivered as a church message, or if it was more oblique. Responding that it was more oblique but there nevertheless, she stated that the process then of examining those oblique but powerful foundations by rethinking Scripture was enormously helpful. Speaking for her group, she also believed it was a process in progress and a journey in which the group was looking at Creation and even divine creativity differently.

In this way, committee members wrestled with the moral implication of the connections they had drawn and extricated old, anti-environmental beliefs from the emerging synthesis of spiritual values and environmental concerns.

Again, while the focus here is process, not outcome, two examples of how interpretations of symbols are changing may be helpful. Consider two central Christian teachings: the Incarnation and the Redemption. Madeleine exemplifies the way people's beliefs and community affiliation can evolve: she was raised Catholic but is now a leader in her Presbyterian Church. During the focus group, she expressed her changing views of the Incarnation:

I've always felt this connection to nature and I've always felt that God is in nature. That really hasn't changed, but it's become refined with my consciousness about responsibility. I realize that I truly do believe in the Incarnation. It's God in us, but us means us … as part of nature. So if God is going to work through us, it's not just people to people. It's also people to where we are and it's this gift. Our being is not just this body but it's also where we live.

One young member of a progressive Baptist church developed a new view of redemption that recast the central Christian concept of salvation into terms of wholeness. For Eric, wholeness suggested the interdependence and integration of an ecological perspective. He reflected that redemption used to mean primarily the act of being saved—redemption related to confessing sin, being good enough, and being worthy of Christ’s sacrifice. Now, he looked upon redemption as being brought into the wholeness that God intended for him, feeling that God wished for him to be a whole integrated person. Eric said, “Instead of thinking of being redeemed, I think of being brought into the wholeness that God has for me.” He consciously linked his spiritual interpretation of redemption as an invitation into wholeness with his environmental perspective that the earth was also meant to be an integrated, whole system of life.

2. Integrating Experiences in Nature with Spirituality

For many, experiences in nature mediate the sacred and invite communion with God. But often these experiences are not explicitly reinforced in worship or catechesis, whether oriented to the environment or not. The considerable power of spiritual experiences in nature may not be integrated into people's conscious religious identities, connected with their consumption habits, or otherwise invoked to alter behaviors, unless processed by discussion.12 Prayerful reflection allows the religious depths of environmental motivation to unfold, precisely as a spiritual renewal, not as a way to join the secular environmental movement. Faith-based sustainability committees provided a rare context for this valuable reflection upon spiritual experiences in nature.

For Steve, a Catholic outdoorsman, faith and green spirituality connected through group engagement at his church. He agreed to participate in his church’s sustainability committee at the urging of his wife, who was already a member. Before joining the group, his commitment to his faith community remained sealed off from his love of nature. These two potent sources of motivation energy were linked through active discussion at the environmental committee meetings he attended:

I guess for me it’s because of my wife’s love and interest, and because of this committee and working with the Unitarians. We had a joint meeting and I saw what they were doing. I think that’s where my education started. I had read periodically this stuff. I didn’t see it as part of being a Catholic, nor did I hear pastors and priests and people all over the place saying it was.

Experiences in nature were not decisive for all. Sarah, a young Evangelical Christian, clearly rooted her religious attitude toward creation in the Christian scriptures:

My identity as a Christian is so connected with creation care and helping the poor, but I don’t know if I would be that way if I wasn’t Christian. As an individual I’ve always been so much more rational, logical, and pragmatic and not necessarily that caring. If I wasn’t a Christian I’d probably just say, we’re just human beings, we’re just animals, we just need to make the best of it while we’re here. And it was really searching through Scripture that led me to the care that I have for creation.

Nonetheless, for many like Chris, experiences in nature were central to their spirituality. As Chris, an Episcopal priest’s wife, said, she “worked out her life walking up and down the beach.”

Reflecting on experiences in nature therefore forges connections with formal religious teachings and their traditional, and explicit, commitments to social justice. It is true that Christians who belong to secular environmental groups like the Sierra Club are more likely to consider environmental issues important than churchgoers who are not Sierra Club members. However, studies show that congregational discussion adds to motivation beyond previous environmental affiliation. Sociologists have found that “church effects are found amid strong personal predispositions and secular sources of information . . . the effects due to the congregational context are real and not proxies for preexisting attitudes and affiliations.” That is, raising environmental concerns in church has an additional impact on its members.

In short, experiences of the numinous in nature do not necessarily create religious conservationists, nor does concern for nature automatically translate into faith-inspired leadership. A process that integrates environmental concern into religious identity and behavior does.

Deepening Community Values

3. The Ties That Bind: Reinforcing Shared Values

Social engagement brings ideas to life. Relationships within a faith community make it easier for people to identify with values about the earth that have surfaced during discussion, to commit to advocacy, and even to undertake sacrificial actions. Group dynamics that intensified group identity naturally intensified people’s commitment to the explicitly shared values of the group.

David Krantz, a leading researcher on environmental decisions at the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions at Columbia University, defines a social goal as either “a goal to affiliate with a group or a goal that is a consequence of an affiliation.” Affiliations may exist with “groups of any size, from a relationship with one other person to an abstract identity as a 'good citizen.’” Relationships within a group lift individualistic decisions out of a self-serving economy into a communal exchange with multiple rewards. In congregations, for example, people seek not only worship and religious meaning but also friendship, a place to share values and sustain ideals, and somewhere to express their concern for others through service.

Let us take the example of consumerism, a common social goal that can have negative consequences for the environment. In the United States, consumer society has enormous power to define the goals of the individual that translate into social acceptance. Against that power, religious traditions offer alternate visions as legitimate social norms. While counter-cultural, simplicity is an ancient, traditional religious value—not a new green invention. But as an environmental virtue, it is an example of spiritual renewal and a reinterpreted tradition. As Tim, the pastor of a small, progressive Baptist church in Seattle, said, “The seeds of anti-capitalism are to sell all your possessions and give them to your neighbor. That's resident in the tradition and those things may come back to focus people's spiritual lives in a way that they haven't in the current time.”

“That resident may be in solitary confinement!” said Margaret.

Tim said, “It may be safely locked away. It's there nonetheless.”

Margaret’s witty comment that simplicity, once “resident” in religious traditions, is now a resident of solitary confinement shows how such values may be safely locked away, a background value defeated by middle-class mores. But discussing alternative religious norms among a faith community helps counteract the background values of consumption, convenience, and endless distraction, all challenges strongly identified by research participants as barriers to making sustainable changes.

In effect, positive peer pressure can take over. When I asked a Unitarian group how they planned to achieve their goal of zero emissions as a congregation, Bob replied, “Peer pressure!” A woman added, “No one would dare drive a Hummer in here!” By talking in a group, people become more aware when they are experiencing consumer pressure. Furthermore, public commitments to environmental values make it very hard to backtrack on one's commitments. Tim's Baptist church had run a reduced-driving campaign. Then, he bought an SUV as his car couldn't handle certain hauling trips. The irony of buying an SUV created more cognitive dissonance and feelings of hypocrisy than he could handle. Previously, Tim had a Jesus fish symbol on his car, but as he couldn't stomach putting it on the truck, the Jesus fish ended up on his bicycle. In this symbolic transfer, he literally reconnected the way his faith and green values merged: where the rubber meets the road.

Once new symbolic syntheses are imagined, these renewed worldviews spread in congregations because of the members’ social affiliations. David Krantz has found that “individual differences in cooperation relate more to differences in group affiliation than to personality traits such as altruism.” Because smaller groups create stronger affiliations, they also create greater cooperation. For example, the bonds within a congregation where people are well known tend to be stronger than those in nation-wide political parties. Cooperation is particularly high among faith-based environmentalists who meet as a group, rather than read the latest article about ecospirtual-

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ity at home by themselves. Past collaborations and shared experiences build trust and cooperation.\textsuperscript{16} Their shared values, group identity, and core principles not only inspire action but also sustain cooperation against our culture of multitasking and distraction.\textsuperscript{17}

4. Redefining Social Justice

In addition to reinforcing values, community discussion achieves the critical aim of redefining social justice in the ecological era. Groups were able to expand the meaning of social justice and embrace creation care as a Christian value. Framing environmental care as a moral issue, an invitation to spiritual renewal, or a justice imperative—all of which are true—is an essential tactic for engaging people and influencing moral commitments. Ministers need to understand their community and ground this mission in the guiding values with which the community identifies.\textsuperscript{18}

Congregations explicitly encourage ethical reflection and moral action; one of their main functions is to share ethical norms. Through the process sociologists call “normative diffusion,” members observe others’ behavioral cues while developing their own opinions.\textsuperscript{19} As a result, sustainable ideals within worldviews take on new importance and meaning.

Social justice is a major religious motivation within the green spirituality of faith-based environmentalists.\textsuperscript{20} Through conversation, traditional concerns for social justice developed beyond providing for human needs. In congregations, this development occurred against a background of shared values that allowed for the reframing and integrating of traditional concerns with the realities of climate change. The definition of social justice itself expands to include creation care.

In the new synthesis, social justice serves the entire ecological community. Many have come to see the earth as the new poor and understand the earth’s exploitation as a sharing in the sufferings of Christ and the poor. Theologian Edward Schillebeeckx specifically draws this connection between Christ, the \textit{ecce homo}, and the ongoing sufferings of the poor on “the many crosses which have been erected and continue to be erected, and also the \textit{ecce natura} as the polluted world of creation.”\textsuperscript{21} Thus the instruction of Matthew 25 to care for the poor as for Christ requires care for the earth as well, and new commitments for environmental ministry emerge from existing social justice values.

**Empowering Environmental Ministry**

5. The Unifying Power of Worship and Celebration

Worship and other celebrations of the beauty and abundance of God’s creation help transcend the sometimes contentious aspects of environmental conversation. Because group experiences of worship and celebration inscribed care for creation within ancient traditions, worship smoothed the way to accepting new ideas. Worship had a unifying and communal authority that transcended the divisive taint of politics or wary mistrust of that global

\textsuperscript{16} Groups with some prior assumptions are more likely to cooperate and make decisions reflecting group values than individuals or groups put together without social cohesion. Krantz et al., “Individual Values and Social Goals,” 186.


\textsuperscript{19} Djupe and Hunt, “Beyond the Lynn White Thesis,” 672.

\textsuperscript{20} Lothes, “Worldviews on Fire,” 504.

warming science. As one woman put it, “On Creation Sunday we're reading something that's familiar to them that they know is not something we made up—the scriptures.”

The creation-centered themes within familiar texts, hymns, and rituals could be highlighted, bringing forth new environmental resonances. Bill, a member of a Presbyterian leadership team, emphasized that things are most successful when they contain an element of celebration:

I think when it doesn't work so well is when it’s done out of a sense of duty or obligation or “got to change those light-bulbs.” But when we have Earth Day celebration in our church, that’s when we are going best because we have a service that’s full of celebration, and interest, and excitement, and then we have some sort of project after that where we go out and get our hands dirty. In that sort of setting it seems to flow.

Though often the laity evangelized the clergy by first bringing environmental concerns to their attention, most participants affirmed the indispensable role of priests, pastors, rabbis, sensei, or imams. Clergy had the unique ability to affirm, inspire, and, more to the point, legitimate an environmental ministry. While the role of clergy is beyond the scope of this paper, it is certain that the leadership of clergy is essential. Raymond, a leader in a mega-church, evangelical Creation Care committee, said:

One of the key things for our action is the senior pastor at the top who is absolutely in favor of this. Without having heard my pastor talk about it, [it] wasn't necessarily something I'd see as a biblical responsibility. I think if we had started something like this at just a grass roots level without that level of support and leadership, I don't think that it would have been as well received.

Pablo, a leader in a pesticide education program for migrant workers, emphasized the authority of the clergy and the ability of priests to call attention to issues. He said, “Well, in the class we have the priest calling everybody when they come to church. During the homily he tells you, there's going to be an important meeting at the school. I want you to go ahead and attend this meeting and all that.”

When asked if the class listened more to the priest than to him, Pablo replied, “Oh yeah.”

At the same time, though, the work was seen as the task of the laity. Most clergy are overworked and often feel they don't have the time to lead in new directions. A survey of Presbyterian pastors in Baltimore found that none had the time or personnel to initiate a program or educate a committee, despite expressed concern for the environment. The clergy can encourage environmental ministries, but somebody else has to make it happen.

Perhaps most realistically, congregations have their own reasons for complicity with society’s inertia regarding urgent action for the environment. These reasons relate to politics, the priorities of clergy mentioned above, and preparedness in terms of seminary training. The problem of preparedness has solutions. While the moral status of ecological action is not standard seminary fare, excellent initiatives for professional development in environmental ministry exist. More risky is the correlation of environmental attitudes with political affiliation because political views are divisive, and congregations can be fragile communities. The defection of five families can destabilize a small and precariously financed congregation. Influential leaders and donors might resist a message of environmental stewardship, and clergy may fear to alienate them.

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Furthermore, political views are not easily changed and are often capable of trumping religious teaching. One member of a focus group recalled hearing a fellow church member with traditionally conservative views tell him, “I don’t want to be legislated from the pulpit. Don’t tell me how to live.” Despite the influential nature of political worldviews, political issues lacked credibility by taint of association with politicians who, in the words of one woman, “play both sides of the table.”

For all these reasons, discussion that surfaces potentially contentious issues in a friendly context is transformative. The humor and warmth between friends, as well as the leaders’ personal invitation, enabled one politically conservative church member to attend the discussion, maintain her own perspective, and still share in the conversation. In recounting why she was there, Beth said, “I’m here because [the leaders] asked me to be here. I said, ‘But you know I’m not a global warming proponent.’ And they said, ‘That’s okay. Come along. We haven’t abused you about anything for a while.’

Similarly, the power of worship to ground environmental concern in traditional symbols is essential. Faith leaders can make creation care a moral issue, one that is permissible for churches to pursue. The evidence given in the Fifth Assessment Report is a clear ally in this is respect. As a member of a Reformed Church said, “I think the evidence has become overwhelming; it’s undeniable that the earth is failing fast. It’s more politically embraced on all parts of the spectrum and therefore it’s safer for churches to talk about this and not feel like they are trying to come down one way or another on politics.”

Conclusion: Collective Conversion

Pastors, ministers, lay leaders, and congregants are coming together for this ecological mission. The five dynamics outlined here accelerate personal and communal change and engage congregations’ complicity with the inertia of much of society to act decisively against climate change. But group dynamics are not the whole story. Social affiliation does not explain pioneers or outliers. Some pioneers are inspired to act in ways their own group does not yet endorse, and their moral originality challenges the status quo. At the same time, the lonely pioneer can rarely work great change singlehandedly.

Nonetheless, there are important ways that religious identity inspires moral courage. Above all, Christianity insists on the obligation to care for one’s neighbor through all the storms of misfortune that afflict them. The narratives of protest, freedom, and renewal are resources within the Christian tradition to inspire ministers and laity in their work for the earth. Such courage is needed—and authorized from the inside—to critique and expand religious traditions and to challenge unsustainable lifestyles that go unquestioned.

Langdon Gilkey once defined the theological task as concerned with two great questions. First, it addresses the question of justice, liberation, and peace. Secondly, theologians tackle the hermeneutic problem, or “how traditional words, concepts and symbols are to be interpreted intelligibly in our cultural present.”23 The crises of justice and peace, poverty and inequality, are now inextricably linked to ecological degradation, urging Christians to re-imagine core symbols and renew our covenant with the earth. Guided by the Spirit who renews the face of the Earth, faith communities can share a journey of conversion to a profoundly renewed Christian mission today. Go with them into the fields!