

Sharing and Protecting God's Creation

A 3-Week Environmental Curriculum for Sunday Schools Using the Workshop Rotation Learning Model

Created for the Congregational Church of Weston, UCC by Dr. Paul Schendel and Catherine Liddell, Director of Faith Discovery for Children, March 2009

Purpose:

To contribute to the children's awareness of how all of creation is linked together, how humans depend on each other, how other life depends on humans.

To give children the Biblical underpinnings for their increasing awareness of the need to protect the environment.

To drive home the message that God needs us to set things right. God cannot do it without us.

Overarching messages

God put us in charge

We've been negligent for a very long time and we need to change our ways

We need to think of others more, our neighbors now and our "neighbors" of the future.

God needs US to put things right

There will and should be overlap between what's presented in this workshop and what the kids have learned about the environment in school. In fact, we encourage the kids to make all the connections they can. What's different here will be the Biblical underpinnings. The imperative to "clean up our act" comes from God and the way God set up God's creation.

We've divided up the topic into three themes and we've selected an activity that will enable the children to connect both with that theme and the overarching message. There are, of course, other activities that could be done under each theme. Ours correspond to interests of the teachers who have committed to teach the three weeks. The themes are:

In Gods Image/And God's Creation Was GOOD!

Who Is My Neighbor

God Has No Hands But Ours

It is recommended that Leaders read also the articles and lesson plans for the other two workshops so they can tie in to what the children have already experienced.

In running a workshop rotation, it is essential that the workshop leaders meet together 2-3 weeks ahead of the start to share with each other what they are planning and to solidify the main points. This way, the leaders can more easily tie the themes of the three sessions and reinforce the connection and the message points.

Possible Prayers for all:

1.

God, You gave life to the world. We hear your voice in each soft breeze. Let us see beauty in all you have made and help us learn the lessons. You have hidden in every tree and rock. Make us wise to understand what you teach us. Amen.

2.

Mother, Father God, remind us every day that all life is sacred. Let us feel in our hearts that we are a part of creation and help us to respect the natural world. The earth is so beautiful! Teach us and help us to understand that we can live together in balance and peace with other people, creatures, plants, water, air and the land. Amen.

Workshop I -- In God's Image/God's Creation was GOOD!

This theme observes the world God created, how its parts are interconnected and where we humans fit in. What it means to be made "in God's image." In what ways could we be considered to be "like" God? What it means to "have dominion" over something or someone. Does that mean the power to do with it or them as WE want? Or as God would want? Does it mean to only think of our needs? What does it mean to "subdue the earth"? Does it mean do with it as we will? Or does it just mean till it (for food)? What if our needs are in conflict with the needs of other people, animals, plants? Does "dominion" mean our needs first?

After the first week, leaders should ask the children about the previous week's workshop, what activities they did and what they learned. The Leader should remind them about the lesson points to tie those points to the messages of weeks lesson.

Scriptural Connections

Genesis 1:26-30

[Note: in the other version of creation, Genesis 2:4-17, there is no mention of humans being put in charge, having dominion.]

Psalms 139:15 talks about being intricately wrought in the depths of the earth. [the idea being perhaps, that we are also OF the earth, co-inhabitants, not above it, but within it, linked to everything in it, needing to create compatible rhythms with everything in it.]

Psalms 8:3-6 The intricacies of creation; "man" has been put in charge of it.

Psalms 65:9-10 How God's creation works

Psalms 95:5 "The sea is his, for he made it; for his hands formed the dry land."

Psalms 104:10-24 Goes into detail about how the earth works, how marvelous it all is and praises God who set it all in motion.

Isaiah 65:18 "...rejoice forever in what I create"

Isaiah 66:1-2 ...all these things my hand has made.

Learning Outcomes

Children will learn what the Bible has to say about humans' place in creation.

Children will begin to form an idea of what it means to have dominion over something/someone.

Children will gain an understanding of the complexity of creation and how everything in it depends on everything else in it.

Workshop Activity: Journalism & Story Telling

It is recommended that Leaders read also the articles and lesson plans for the other two workshops so they can link to what the children have already experienced.

Plan:

Welcome the Children

Introduce the theme. [article provided to prime the pump]

Bible verses

Discussion

Ask the children for examples of how things are interconnected.

How do we take care of something that is God's?

What does it mean to "have dominion"?

In what ways are we the "image" of God, made in God's image?

Workshop Activity: Journalism

Goal of the activity: to have the children write articles about any of the above questions.

These articles will be turned into a newspaper that will be distributed to the congregation and posted on the website. They can also write a poem, or they can make illustrations.

Age Adaptations

Children in 6th -8th grades (Explorers) will already have exposure to the interconnectedness of life from science classes and are ready to consider the concept of dominion and ways we are/can be the "image" of God. They will be the stronger writers and might even venture into poetry.

Children in 3rd-5th grades (Lighthouse Keepers) will be able to grasp some aspects of how things are connected. Questions like "would happen if the worms in the ground died from too much weed killers on the ground?" will help them get their heads around the question. Questions like "what does a good leader do?" , "what does a bad leader do?" might help get them to see that "dominion" isn't necessarily the negative power image that might first come to mind.

They can write or illustrate.

Children in K-2nd grades might enjoy a lively reading of the Psalm 104 passage. You might even ask them if they've seen each of the elements mentioned in the psalm. Some are obvious, of course, but that will help them stay focused. You can ask them if they have things that are very special. What those are and if they take care of them differently than how they treat other things they have. Try to come up with a connection between that caring and caring for the earth. They can illustrate what the Explorers have written. Or they can illustrate images from Psalm 104.

For alternative activities for this theme, see Appendix

Workshop II – Love Your Neighbor

In this workshop, the children will begin to expand their ideas about who our neighbors are: Neighbors in the next town; Neighbors in other parts of the world. Neighbors we'll never see because they come after us. How can we love those neighbors? How does what we do affect them? The scouting model comes to mind: to leave our "campsite" cleaner than how we found it!

If there isn't enough for everyone to have a lot, can we be happy with everyone having just some?

Scriptural Connections

Exodus 23:4-5 describes what to do with something that belongs to someone else, even if that person is your enemy.

Leviticus 25:23-24 being kind to the land

Deuteronomy 22:1-4 similar to the Exodus verses, but the owner of the lost thing is "your brother."

Proverbs 31:6-9 how we are to treat the needy

Matthew 7:12 the "Golden Rule"

Matthew 25:31-40 How we need to look after one another.

Luke 10:25-28 and **Matt 22:36-40** "... and your neighbor as yourself."

James 2:14-17 we can't say we are faithful if we send someone away who's in need.

Learning Outcomes

Children will expand their ideas of who our neighbors are.

Children will begin to connect their choices with the effects of those choices on others.

Children will expand their ideas of ways to be considerate of neighbors far away.

Workshop Activity: Arts

The children will work together to create a Rap Song that conveys the new ideas stemming from discussions.

It is recommended that Leaders read also the articles and lesson plans for the other two workshops so they can link to what the children have already experienced.

Plan:

Welcome the Children

Connect to the theme [an article is provided to prime the Leader's pump!]

Bible verses

Discussion

Questions could circle around how the Bible says we are to treat our neighbors. Try to come up with environmental versions of their suggestions. Older children might be able to wrap around the concept of distinguishing between "want" and "need". The idea being that we should use what we need, but not more. Start with things they have immediate experience of and find equivalents in the environment.

Age-Related Adaptations

K-2nd will connect easily with the "neighbor" concept as it pertains to people who live next door, and maybe with people who live in the same town. But they can still begin to think about how their choices affect another person. If they take all the Model Magic clay, there won't be any for the next person. If that's difficult for them, turn the equation around such that the person who went before them took it all. It's about sharing. They can talk about how it feels not to have any. For the Rap: they will be the last group in this rotation, so they can learn some verses from what's already been written, and they can connect to the rhythm by clapping, or using some rhythm instruments. OR if there are some movements appropriate to parts of the song, they can learn them or even make some up.

Children in 3rd-5th grades will connect easily with the "neighbor" concept where it concerns people in the same town, and possibly the same state. See if you can stretch their awareness to people in a far away land. An example would be the effect of our sprawling cities or diminished forests on where birds can stop to rest on their migrations north and south. They are the first in this rotation, so for them it might work to have a tune they might already know and have them put new words to it. Or you might have them come up rhyming words for key concepts.

Children in 6th-8th grades will connect well with the concept of "neighbors" being people in other lands, but might be unaware that our choices affect them. Try to introduce them to the concept of the idea of a "neighbor" being someone who will live in the next generation!

For alternative activities for this theme, see Appendix

Workshop III -- God Has No Hands But Ours

It falls to us to keep God's creation going, to take care of what God has given us and to clean up what we can. Changing our habits becomes an act of faith, an act of honoring God. This one circles back to the first one, illustrating what it means "to have dominion over". Actually, the themes all swirl around each other! This theme confronts head-on the complaint that "if I didn't make the mess why should I have to clean it up?" Children will relate to that feeling well. We clean it up because it's there, because we honor God when we do.

Scriptural Connections

Genesis 1:26-30 The same creation reading, but now connected to taking care of what God has given us.

Psalms 104:10-24 "May the glory of the LORD endure forever..."

Isaiah 65:18 We are to rejoice in what God has created. Rejoice, not destroy.

Isaiah 66:1-2 What God has made belongs to God. Who are we to destroy it? Should it not be we who change our ways? Should it not be we who clean up what has been messed up?

James 2:14-17 How we are to treat those in need. This talks about people. Isn't the earth also in need?

Matthew 25:31-40 How we need to look after one another.

Learning Outcomes:

Children will confront the human tendency to blame someone else for the environmental problems we face.

Children will recognize that God can't clean up the mess. God only has us.

Children will begin to see that changing our environmental habits is an act of faith, an act of honoring God.

Children will learn about concrete things we can do to leave a softer imprint on the environment.

Workshop Activity: Scavenger Hunt/Energy Audit

Children will come up with a checklist of ways the church can become better stewards, better care-takers of the environment. They will wander around the church building inside and out, looking for ways the church is being environmentally sensitive and for ways the church could improve. They will come up with a list of recommendations. And they will be encouraged to take their checklist home and do a tally there as well.

Kids go around the building, indoors and out with a prepared check list to see how we as a church are doing to reduce waste, minimize our carbon footprint, what we are doing right, what we could improve. Make a list and come up with ideas.

Plan:

Welcome the Children

Connect to the theme [article provided to prime the pump!]

Bible verses

Discussion

Some time can be spent in what the need is with caution about not presenting so much that the children are frightened. Some time can be spent in what keeps us from doing better (this is where the "I didn't make the mess, why should I clean it up" syndrome comes in). The real focus is drumming up enthusiasm for becoming part of the solution. What better habits can we learn? This leads directly into the checklist that will serve as the basis for the scavenger hunt itself.

This topic is greatly enhanced if there is someone, especially someone in the church, who has been on some kind of environmental stewardship outreach project and is willing to come and share with the children about the experience.

Discuss the Energy Audit and scavenge around the church collecting data. Come back and discuss results. Create an action plan for what the children can do going forward. For example:

K-2 could:

- do an energy audit with their parents,
- make certificates to reward the grown-ups for good stewardship practices. Kids get to say how the certificate is earned
- make signs reminding people to turn off lights,
- they could build bird feeders

Grades 3-5 could:

- take part in a neighborhood, church cleanup
- make certificates to reward the grown-ups for good stewardship practices. Kids get to say how the certificate is earned
- use their bicycles to get places whenever feasible
- suggest to parents that errands be organized to reduce trips

Grades 6-8

- all of the above
- go to 350.org to find out about community activities that foster environmentally sustainable life styles
- begin to become politically involved so they can have an influence on decisions made at home and in the wider community.

Age-Related Adaptations

If the youngest children have this workshop first, focus on being happy about the world God has given us. And what we can do to keep it working well. They can also connect to taking care of something that belongs to someone else (God) who has given it to us to use and take care of. Make sure the checklist has things on it they can find.

Children in the upper grades will connect well and fairly easily to this theme. Older children can process the content much easier so leaders are encouraged to bring in things like magazine articles, websites, resource material. If the discussion is lively, one could even forego the scavenger hunt and go straight to "what can we do?".

For alternative activities for this theme, see Appendix

Readings for Workshop Rotation on Faith and the Environment

The following readings, excerpts taken from various websites, are intended as a resource to prime your own pump, so to speak, so you can lead a discussion with the children. Most of this has been "cherry picked" from the following websites, and I highly recommend poking around in these:

www.seasonsofcreation.com

www.macucc.org/news/environmentalresources.htm

www.webofcreation.org

<http://www.irejn.org/> which offers this link:

https://www.kintera.org/site/c.gsJPK3PEJnH/b.4922691/k.F40F/Love_God_Heal_Earth/apps/ka/sd/donor.asp?c=gsJPK3PEJnH&b=4922691&en=duLUL5NIIgLXI5PNJmIQJ0MSLpI3IIOVJeLXLcMQImI0L9OMJnKbE a succinct way of looking at what it means to love our neighbors from an environmental viewpoint. Highly recommended! Don't be afraid of the address! Select it, copy it into your browser and let your computer do the rest.

The excerpts here are put under our thematic headings, but should be read by all because they are all linked and are interchangeable.

In God's Image/And What God Created Was GOOD!

I. Excerpt from: An Invitation to Worship: A Theology of Kinship with Creation on the website: www.seasonsofcreation.com/theology/kinship

In Genesis Two, Earth is a parent of living beings. God moulds the first human (*`adam*), and all the living creatures (except for Eve), from the ground (*`adamah*) of Earth. There is a kinship from the beginning--common clay, common flesh. Similarly in Genesis 1.24, all animal life also comes from the *`adamah* of Earth. God does not say, 'Let there be animals!' Rather God says, 'Let Earth bring forth all kind of animals'. Humans and all life are born of Earth; they are kin.

Out of that same ground that God used to form humans, God causes trees and vegetation to grow. Trees and humans have the same source, the same ground (*`adamah*). It is not just *`adam* who is made of *`adamah*. All fauna and flora share the same origin, the same mother. The creation story of Genesis One offers a similar story of origin. God does not say, 'let there be vegetation'. Rather God says,

Let Earth put forth vegetation; plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with a seed in it. (Gen. 1.11)

Genesis Two, suggests ... that we have more than a biological kinship with animals, birds and other living creatures. God does not create the animal kingdom simply to exist. These creatures are formed from Earth to be potential partners for the first human. The very idea of such a partnership is rather ludicrous if there is not something about other living creatures

that includes an affinity with humans—an affinity that is more than biological.

After making the animals and birds from ground, God brought them to Adam to see what he would name them. Adam thereupon names 'every living creature' and explores its potential as his partner. Some would argue that 'naming' something implies an expression of authority over that thing. But that is not necessarily the case. Naming can be an expression of kinship, celebration and community. When Ruth gives birth to a child, she hands the child over to Naomi who physically nurses the baby. However, neither Naomi nor the father name the child. The child is named Obed by all the women in the village. Naming here is an expression of communal kinship and solidarity. Similarly, the Genesis Two creation account is a story about the garden of life, the Earth family and how its members are related.

II. Excerpts from the Operation Creation Vacation Bible School Lesson Plans (http://www.newcommunityproject.org/pdfs/operation_creation.pdf) on the macucc.org/news/environmentalresources.htm page.

III. More Thoughts

The creation story is full of rich imagery and for children may actually seem like fantasy or magic. To shift children away from the "Poof, God made it!" scenario, read Genesis with emphasis on "God did it" part rather than how. What God made was "good" and eventually "very good" by God's standards. Who are we to argue with God's standards?!

Introduce the humans' role in caring for creation.

For an example of how interconnected life is, this is a great example. It's also an example of something good coming from something we usually think of as "yucky". (from the same webpage as the previous paragraph)

Adaptations in the animal world (and plant) are remarkable. To us they seem like extraordinary skills but to the animals and plants, it's about survival and continuing their species. For instance, ask the children if they've heard of dung beetles. The insects roll up balls of orangutan dung and lay their eggs there. A certain fly knows this, and lays its eggs there too, so that when the fly larva hatch, they eat the beetle larva. But wait! There is an orchid (tropical flower) that figured this out, and it developed a scent like dung to attract these flies. Why do you think the orchid wanted the flies to land on it? To pollinate it! In fact, this fly is the only insect that pollinates this flower—so if this fly would become extinct, so would this orchid. [The earth is losing 50-100 species of plants and animals a day to extinction. Why are they becoming extinct? (invite responses) Reasons: cutting forests, over-fishing oceans, pollution, global warming, farming, road and building construction.] God is truly a master of creation through caring enough to give all creatures, big and small, the unique skills they need to survive.

NOTE: this kind of example could jog the memory of some of the kids to come up with other examples they could write about in the Journalism workshop.

Taking stock of God's earth

Earth—what's on it! Draw a large globe on the dry erase board. Ask the children to name the various things that are important to life on planet Earth. As they name them, draw in the

things they mention (water, atmosphere, trees, birds, food, fish, sun, etc.). Ask why various ones of these are important—why did God create them, what do they do for the earth or for other living creatures? (Birds distribute seeds, eat insects; small fish are food for larger fish, fish are food for people; trees make oxygen, put water into the air for rain, clean the air, provide homes for animals, etc.)

Mention that many of these things are in trouble because of human actions. [the exmples that follow can be scary for young kids, so use with caution.] The large fish are nearly gone from the seas (90% of the large predatory fish—tuna, marlin, swordfish—have disappeared due to over-fishing); the Amazon rainforest loses about six million acres of trees per year (mostly due to cattle ranches, but also for growing crops and getting lumber); many birds are endangered as the world's forests disappear; even polar bears are not doing well as the ice melts from global warming.

Love Your Neighbor

A nice spoken introduction to this theme can be found on this website: <http://www.irejn.org/> Look in the list on the left for Love God Heal The Earth. It takes you to a short You Tube clip on which an author introduces the theme of her book. She speaks directly to the theme of this workshop.

For information on international treaties of cooperation on environmental issues see <http://www.greenpeace.org>

God Has No Hands But Ours

We become stewards. Caring for the earth because God wills it:
Genesis 2:15 "And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it." (My Study Bible suggests that "dress" means to cultivate, or to till and that "keep" means to guard its sanctity.) Till and keep: another way of looking at this is through a simple definition of conservation. Conservation is the use [till] but not abuse [keep] of natural resources.

The best website I've seen so far for background, inspiration and ideas is www.webofcreation.org

APPENDIX

Optional Activities for "In God's Image"

Journalism Workshop Make a newspaper with articles about God's creation and our place in it, how we are doing in taking care of it. Can have illustrations, cartoons, photographs, puzzles, crosswords, etc.

Poetry Workshop Create haiku and/or limericks or other kinds of poetry about creation and the world God made us.

Life Forms Workshop Create an inventory of all the creatures around our church, in the ground, in the sky, in the water, in the soil, in the air. How do they depend on each other? How do we interact with them? Are we friend or foe? How can we be stewards? This could turn into a big poster. What about God's creation and our place in it inspires you?

Optional Activities for "Love Your Neighbor"

Geography Workshop Create a paper maché globe. Discuss what the environmental challenges are in different areas on the globe (overgrazing, over-fishing, over-population, over-consumption of resources, etc). This is not a solve-the-issue exercise, only one of building awareness.

"What is enough?" Discuss the question and come up with ways of not wasting so that the people who come after us will have some.

Game Workshop Make up a How Little Can YOU Use? game.

Drama Workshop Make up a skit that tells a story about being a good neighbor. About taking care of something in the environment so there's some left for someone else.

Optional Activities for "God Has No Hands But Ours"

This is a DO IT workshop, so any way of enabling the children to do an environmental stewardship activity can be considered. It should be do-able within the framework of Sunday morning. At the end of each session the Leader should engage the children to discern age-appropriate activities that they can do going forward. A helpful resource, especially focusing on the home, is 50 Simple Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth by Earth Works Group.

Nature Workshop

- Make bird houses from waxed milk cartons (50 Simple Things pg. 79)
- Adopt a plot on the church property, make it look nicer, plant things, put a bird house, check on it, even during the summer... (50 Simple, pg. 103)

Other Activities to Consider

Arts - Visual and/or Performance: these can be used to tie all of the themes together. In which case, each workshop would weave the themes together rather than just concentrate on one theme.

Create works of art out of recycled materials

Create a rap. This activity is not recommended for the "God Has No Hands But Ours" workshop as that workshop seeks to get the children more actively involved in taking care of the environment.

Make prophet posters, like sandwich board, with words a prophet might want to say to wake us up to our environmental stewardship responsibilities. You could have an arts parade as part of Children's Sunday.

Decorate canvas bags with workshop themes to be sold as a fund raiser for the church to implement no-waste, low-carbon remedies, e.g. maybe buy barrels to collect rain water for watering our plantings in the summer.

Energy-Food Workshop

Figure out ways we can be Lo-Carb consumers of Carbon! Make a "diet" plan for the church, or for home.