

# Where Two or More are Gathered Eco-Justice as Community



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*Creating a united and God-centered community was an ongoing struggle for the Israelite tribes, for the exiled wanderers in the desert, and in the voiced communal praise, gratitude, and sorrow of Psalms and Lamentations. God made a radical move to build community and live among us through Jesus. The book of Acts and many of Paul's letters offer accounts of new followers of Christ learning what it means to "share everything they had." Acts 2:44*

Today, we remain mindful of the importance of community. With Jesus' assurance that, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them" (Matthew 18:20). Christians are building sacred communities through ways ancient and modern. In the midst of cultural and economic forces that encourage and reward individualism, Christians are called to reach beyond ourselves, to embrace all God's children and affirm our interconnectedness and interdependence. While technology has enabled sprawling virtual communities and facilitated connections that span the globe, nowhere is the call and opportunity for discipleship and transformation greater than in our local community.

This Earth Day we invite you to reflect on the goodness of God's creation through the lens of your local community. Can the food we eat strengthen our bonds with one another? How do our choices affect our brothers and sisters who live on the economic or social margins of our communities? How might we as people of faith celebrate the abundance God has given us and take action to ensure all God's children share in it? Through prayerful reflection,

worship and engagement, this resource is design to help you bear witness to the purpose and power of community.

## A PLACE AT THE TABLE: FOOD AND COMMUNITY

The multiplication of the loaves and fishes (Matthew 4:17; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:1), the feeding of the 4,000 (Mark 8:1-9; Matthew 15:32-39), the all-welcoming feast in the kingdom of God (Luke 14:15-24), and the last supper (Mark 14:18-26; Luke 22:1-23) are all examples of how Jesus has shown us the importance of sharing nourishing meals together. Eating is a communal expression of faith whether that be a potluck, church picnic, family dinner, or Sunday brunch. Before a meal, we thank God for the food that nourishes us, as well as for the work of all those whose hands harvested, carried, and prepared it.

Not long ago we took for granted that food was produced and shared in a local community. Since World War II, the U.S. has lost more than four million family farms. Today, as corporate agricultural conglomerates have expanded,



**[www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org) is a directory of small farms, farmers markets, and other local food sources searchable by zip code.**



food travels 25 percent farther than it did in 1980, moving between 1,500 to 2,500 miles before it reaches your table. Mass production of food has led to a greater disconnect with the land that grows our food and with the communities that harvest it. Mass production of food has also led to the use of monoculture (single crop agriculture), chemical fertilizers and pesticides, non-medicinal antibiotics in animal farming, and the use of fossil fuels for food production and transport. These practices can increase the health risks to farm workers and decrease the quality of food that reaches our table.

Supporting local farmers and food can be an act of faith and community building. Local farms are better equipped than factory farms for purposeful land stewardship, dignified work conditions, and less toxic food production methods. Since local food does not have to be hauled long distances, fresher and more nutritious food can be eaten that does not require large amounts of fossil fuels to transport it. In fact, eating locally produced food, in addition to supporting local farmers and families, can reduce an individual's carbon footprint by 12 percent.

People and communities of faith are taking action to build community around local, healthier food. Some are finding ways to promote and support Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and farmers' markets. In a CSA farm, individuals or families purchase food shares and receive a portion of the harvest every week. Alternatively, at a farmers' market, local producers offer their harvest throughout the growing season so the community can select from the bounty of their labor. The benefit of participating in a CSA or farmers' market is that you can support and get to know local farmers. Sometimes, churches serve

as CSA pick-up locations or farmers' market sites. Some churches have created gardens on their land: community gardens where members and neighbors work together on a plot of land for their families' consumption or to share with members of the community most in need.

If the prospect of starting a community garden or organizing a farmers' market seems too daunting, know that there are other opportunities for your faith community to help promote community through local food. Churches can host fellowship dinners that feature locally produced foods, church mission groups can offer a share in a CSA to an underserved family in the community, or church bulletins can promote local food options to their congregations. For more ideas of how your faith community can help promote local food, visit [www.ncccojustice.org/earthday](http://www.ncccojustice.org/earthday).

## SACRED WATERS: WATER AND COMMUNITY

Scripture abounds with references to water. In Numbers, water is described as flowing from Israel's buckets so that their offspring will have abundant water. Ezekiel 34, talks of drinking clear water, but not fouling the rest with your feet.

Christians recognize water as the tangible sign of God's welcome to new community members in baptism. Water is a revelation of God's interconnected community of life. Because of this, Christians are called to steward and share water in a way that extends hospitality for all God's Creation.

One place where we witness the interconnected community of life is in our local watersheds and waterways. Local waters provide food and shelter for a variety of God's

creatures. These waters also provide life and livelihood for people. As a waterway sustains a community, the community must steward their waters. In January 2011, more than 40,000 waterbodies were listed by the US Environmental Protection Agency as “impaired,” meaning they do not meet the set water quality standards for uses such as aquatic life, swimming, or recreation. However, the number of polluted waterbodies is likely higher, as this list is only made up of waterbodies that have been tested. To steward our waterways we should keep local streams, creeks, and lakes free from pollution and excess nutrients as well as conserve water in our homes, workplaces, and congregations.

There are many actions you can take with your church to steward local waterways and conserve water. You can sponsor a stream clean up, sign up with a local watershed watch to test water quality, and purchase environmentally friendly cleaners to protect water quality and church members’ health. To conserve water you can install faucet aerators and low flow toilets.. For more ideas, see our NCC Resource “Water Stewards: A Toolkit for Congregational Care of Local Watersheds.” ([www.ncccojustice.org/resources](http://www.ncccojustice.org/resources))

## BREATH OF GOD: AIR AND COMMUNITY

When Jesus breathes the Spirit on the disciples in John 20, a new community and a new creation is coming into being, inspired—breathed together—by the breath of God. The Hebrew word for God’s spirit, “ruah” is the same word as wind and breath. The Spirit of God present in creation (Genesis 1:2) and the wind at Pentecost blowing through to create a new church are the breath of God’s new creation. Breath is a fundamental life force of Creation. As humans breathe out, plants breathe in.

Clean air is essential for human life. An average person breathes in more than 3,000 gallons of air each day. At the same time we inhale life-sustaining oxygen, we also breathe in the byproducts of our lifestyle choices—car fumes, fine particulate waste of industrial production, and chemicals and off gases from synthetic products in our homes. We can only imagine the purity of air that existed when God’s breath first swept across the waters or first filled Adam’s lungs. Today, major contributors to poor air quality include power plants and industrial factories, and mobile sources such as cars, trucks, planes, and trains. Poor air quality



**The task is creating reconciling and reconciled socio-environmental community. And the obstacle is not diversity, biological or otherwise. It is injustice, moral privilege, and exclusion.**

Larry Rasmussen, Earth Habitat, Introduction, p. 6 (Taken from the NCC Environmental Racism Resource)



impacts human health including increases in asthma. With more than half of the country's population living in areas with polluted air this problem is of growing concern. A 2002 study estimated that 30 percent of asthma in children is caused by environmental exposure.

Air presents an inescapable connection to the broader community. While some may make conscious decisions to seek out healthier food and cleaner water, none of us has independent control over the quality of the outdoor air we breathe. All of us are impacted—some more so than others—by the choices made by individuals, businesses, and governments with respect to air pollution. Faith communities can take action to combat poor air quality locally by reducing their use of fossil fuels through energy efficiency and promoting good transportation practices such as carpooling and public transportation for attending church events. For more ideas on how your congregation can engage locally in protecting God's gift of air, visit [www.nccecojustice.org/earthday](http://www.nccecojustice.org/earthday).

## DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACTS

**Doubting Thomas Calls Us into Community.** Thomas asks to see and touch the wounds of Jesus before he will believe in the resurrection. Thomas demonstrates our need to encounter the suffering and struggle of people who are directly affected by oppression. By experiencing the suffering of creation in community, we discover our belief in the possibility of a new Creation. Through the communal experience of God's activity in the wounded places of our world, we are empowered and sent out by the spirit to take action in the world.

## WHEN THE BODY OF CHRIST SUFFERS

When some members of the body of Christ suffer, all of us suffer—even when that suffering cannot be seen or felt. While pollution affects everyone on God's Earth, certain populations suffer a disproportionate impact. Among those who are suffering the most from our lifestyle choices are often the very ones contributing the least to the problem—children, communities of color, developing nations, and low-income neighborhoods. For instance, low-income communities and communities of color face worse health burdens (asthma, cancer, birth defects) because of environmental pollution.

In 1987, the United Church of Christ (UCC) Commission on Racial Justice issued *Report on Race and Toxic Wastes in the United States*. Race, more than class, was shown to be a determining factor in where hazardous waste incinerators, ash landfills, and illegal dumping sites were built and maintained. Twenty years later, the UCC conducted the study again and found the same results. Over time, exposure to toxic wastes increases risk of diabetes, reproductive disorders, birth defects, cancer, Parkinson's disease, and other diseases.

Our individualistic culture is set up so that we will neither notice each others' struggles, nor bear each others' burdens. Yet, Jesus prayed to his Father that his followers "may be one as we are one" (John 17:26). In the words of Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Katherine Schiori, "The ability of any of us to enjoy shalom depends on the health of our neighbors. If some do not have the opportunity for health or wholeness, then none of us can enjoy true and perfect holiness."

# SERMON STARTERS

*In John 17: The night he was betrayed, Jesus prayed to his Father for his followers: “protect them ... so that they may be one, as we are one... so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”*

John 17:11, 26

## COMMUNITY AND THE NEW CREATION

In the story of Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples have gathered together in a locked room and they are worried. Rumors abound that Jesus is missing from the tomb. When Jesus comes to this room, he is greeted by the gathered disciples. The truth and mystery of the resurrection is revealed not in isolation, but in community. In their presence Jesus came to commission the disciples and breathes on them the Holy Spirit. Jesus does not release the Holy Spirit on one person in isolation, but on the community of people. Christ shares the experience of community in that moment. Once filled with this new spirit the disciples are called to action in community. The Church of Acts and Peter praise God for the gift of salvation and New Creation through worship, prayer, and action.

In each of these stories in the Bible, the emphasis is on community and on joining together as one. As Jesus carried

out his ministry, he went forth in the community of his disciples. It is in this spirit and practice of community that we can approach the ministry of tending to God’s Creation. But too often, we seek to do our ministry in isolation, perhaps too busy to join with others in the work or too impatient to form community. But as we gather, two or more, in the name of God, we will feel not only God’s presence, but the guiding Holy Spirit.

We are called to join together as one community and to acknowledge that community goes beyond our own neighborhoods, beyond what we traditionally think of as community and searching out those who are part of the community as a whole. For when one part of the body of Christ suffers, so do all.

As we seek to preserve and protect God’s creation, we should aim to conduct that ministry through community—either existing or created.





## TAKE ACTION

### 5 Ways Build Community Through Eco-Justice

There are multiple ways to engage as a faith community on issues of eco-justice. Below are just a few ideas—for more ideas, visit [www.ncecojustice.org/earthday](http://www.ncecojustice.org/earthday)

1. Focus on Food: Host a Fellowship Dinner that features locally produced food.
2. Limit Transportation Impacts: Carpool or set up group bike rides to get to church events.
3. Protect Local Waterways: Gather a group to clean up a local park or waterway.
4. Seek Justice: Identify a vulnerable population in your community that is suffering from an environmental injustice and discover ways to become more involved, whether through education, fellowship, or advocacy.
5. Study Scripture: Conduct a Bible study or educational forum focused on local water, food, or air issues.

For more information on how to get organized and take action, check out the NCC Activist's Toolbox at: <http://ncecojustice.org/takeaction/action.php>

**One pastor or lay leader should not bear alone the burden of creating change. God calls us not only to be in fellowship together, but to work together in community to bring about justice and do good works. Organizing a community is all about building intentional, personal relationships. A small informal gathering in your church or home is a great first step to organizing. It is okay to start small and grow. Remember that every person who gets involved probably knows someone else they can invite next time. Purposeful 20-30 minute conversations with key people will also help you reach out to others. The better you know each other, the more likely you will be to work together.**

*“We are slowly learning that God gives gifts to us in the most unlikely guises—people we find it hard to like, people with whom we disagree profoundly, and people we would rather ignore or marginalize. We are also learning that we can only be a real community if we’re willing to be faithful to our best and deepest understanding of the truth.”*

Presiding Episcopal Bishop Katherine Schiori



*The National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program* develops Earth Day Sunday materials each year to help congregations celebrate and care for God's Creation. For more information about the Program, to make a donation, or for additional Earth Day resources, visit [www.nccecojustice.org](http://www.nccecojustice.org) or email [info@nccecojustice.org](mailto:info@nccecojustice.org). For more information on how your congregation can practice stewardship of God's Earth visit [www.nccecojustice.org](http://www.nccecojustice.org) or contact [info@nccecojustice.org](mailto:info@nccecojustice.org)

Eco-Justice Programs  
National Council of Churches USA  
110 Maryland Avenue, NE, Suite 108  
Washington, DC 20002

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## CALL TO WORSHIP

**One:** Come—soil, seed, and rain. None will hunger in a garden where workers share the harvest, for where two or more are gathered in God's name.

**Many:** there is our God.

**Leader:** Come—algae, fish, and streams. None will thirst where mindful stewards protect our waters, for where two or more are gathered in God's name.

**Many:** there is our God.

**One:** Come—people from every walk of life. None will fall ill where brothers and sisters in Christ protect one another from toxic burdens, for where two or more are gathered in God's name.

**Many:** there is our God.

## PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND PRAISE

Risen and redeeming God, you came into this world to live among us in your son Jesus. His life, his, death, and his rising have taught us to love. We are bound together with a gift of unity into one Body of Christ. We thank you for teaching us what it means to live in right relationship with all Creation. We praise you for the gift of this community gathered today, growing together in your love.

## PRAYER OF CONFESSION

God, in all your Creation you have revealed to us the fragile interdependence of life. We confess, at times, we have rebelled against you with ideas of self-sufficiency and extreme individualism. We reap without sowing and do harm without knowing. Open our eyes and hearts to your Creation and all who labor to offer us daily with food, water, energy, and sanitation. Help us to build a just, sustainable community of equitable sharing, solidarity, and gratitude.

## ASSURANCE

As sure as we have gathered here in God's name, God is here among us. Even as we try and go astray like a sheep who wanders from the flock, God draws us back into life together. May the power of God's love ever be constant with us, renewing our families, our schools, our workplaces, our churches, our neighborhoods, and all God's Creation.

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Eco-Justice Programs  
110 Maryland Avenue, NE  
Suite 108  
Washington, DC 20002