

And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations

Study Guide

Introduction

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” John 1:1–5

These beautiful words have inspired generations of faithful people who worship a God who brought all things into being and who then came to earth as the Light that overcomes the darkness for the sake of that creation. The triune God creates, redeems and loves the whole cosmos. How and why this happens is a subject for theological study, artistic expression, scientific inquiry, and children’s prayers. The subject takes on new urgency at a time in history when concerns about the fragility of the natural world dominate our public discourse. How are humans to live in healthy relationship with the Creator and the creation? That is the underlying question behind the resource *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations* (Carol Johnston, 2006), which provides biblical and theological foundations for earth care.

This study guide was designed to be used in conjunction with that resource. It provides instruction for leading five one-hour study sessions and is ideal for use:

- by an adult church school class
- by church officers
- in a retreat setting
- by a peacemaking committee
- as a Lenten study
- as the basis for a sermon series

- as a small group study
- for personal study and devotions
- for groups of youth or young adults
- to launch or renew a task force on earth care
- for ecumenical, interfaith or community groups
(adapted to address common concerns for God’s good creation)

Each participant should have a copy of the companion resource, *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations*. If possible, try to get the resource to the participants prior to the beginning of the study and ask participants to read pages 1–8 before the first group gathering. The companion resource can be downloaded in digital form or ordered in hard copy at www.pcusa.org/environment. Leaders will find it helpful to read the entire study guide as well as the companion resource before beginning the study. A chalkboard or newsprint pad will be useful in each session. Some pages of the study guide may be copied for participants’ use, or the leader may download a copy of the study guide for each participant at www.pcusa.org/environment.

Note to leaders: This study guide is designed to be used by volunteer leaders with busy schedules. Clear instructions for facilitating the group discussions are included with each session. There is no need to have an extensive background in the subject area. A love for God and God’s good creation along with the willingness to take the lead in facilitating rich conversations within the faith community are the only prerequisites for leading this study.

Each study session will consist of:

- **Opening**, including prayer and introduction of the theme
- **Listening** to God's Word through Scripture
- **Exploring** the theme by reading selections from *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations* and other resources
- **Reflecting** on the theme and the Scripture passage through group discussion
- **Responding** to the ideas. In each session there will be an activity to be carried out in the time intervening between group meetings. Participants may be asked to keep journals where they keep notes on their personal responses to the ideas as well as prayers, drawings, or creative reflections
- **Closing**, with a prayer and reading assignment for the next gathering

For participants who are interested in learning about how earth care relates to Presbyterian policy, the study guide includes on pages 31-32 the Call to Restore Creation from the 1990 Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice that was adopted by the 202nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission.

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The study guide was produced by PC(USA) Environmental Ministries with support from Presbyterians for Earth Care.

Presbyterians for Earth Care (PEC) and Environmental Ministries dedicate this study guide to the memory of Ken Yost. Ken was the husband of Cathy Yost, the first moderator of Presbyterians for Restoring Creation, the predecessor organization to PEC. Ken was very involved in environmental issues in both his church and his community of Kirkwood, Missouri, where he was the Public Works Director. In 2008 a gunman burst into a City Council meeting in Kirkwood and opened fire, killing five people, including Ken.

Caring for the Garden, the Human Vocation

Session 1

<i>Scripture:</i>	Genesis 1:26–31 Genesis 2:4–7
<i>Theme:</i>	The human relationship with creation is meant to imitate the dominion exercised by God, which involves care for all creatures for the sake of the mutual flourishing of all parts of creation.
<i>Materials Needed:</i>	A copy of the resource <i>And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations</i> for each participant; copies of page 6 of this study guide, pencils or pens, beanbag or soft plastic ball such as a beach ball or child’s ball (optional)
<i>Preparation:</i>	Participants will read pages 1–8 of <i>And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations</i> .

Opening

- **Open** with prayer.
- **Introduce** yourself.
- **Introduce the theme** of the resource *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations*, which can be summarized in these words: God’s relationship with nature, and the human relationship with nature, is a biblical theme. All of creation (in Greek, the cosmos) is included in God’s sustaining care as well as in God’s redemptive work. Disciples of Jesus Christ are called to participate in earth care.
- **Explain** that participants will be reading the companion resource *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations* as well as studying key Scripture passages that will enable them to understand that earth care is not just a casual allusion in Scripture but a central theme in God’s ultimate plan for the creation and for humankind.
- **Describe the themes** of the five sessions.

- **Ask the participants** to introduce themselves by giving their names and identifying some aspect of creation that brings them joy (e.g., My name is George and I enjoy the sunrise in the woods; My name is Karen and I enjoy the companionship of my dog). An alternative get-acquainted exercise involves throwing a beanbag or soft plastic ball to a person across the circle. The person who catches the ball should name some aspect of God’s creation he/she enjoys and then throw the ball or beanbag to another person, who will do the same. This can continue until everyone has had two or three opportunities to speak.

► 15 minutes

Listening

Pass out copies of the Listening exercise on page 6. Ask someone in the group to read the passage aloud as others follow along. Allow 5 minutes of silence while everyone makes brief notes in the Reflect, Respond, and Pray sections. Then ask each participant to work with a partner, sharing some of his or her thoughts and reflections. Ask the partners each to share one prayer request with each other and then close their time together by praying brief (one-sentence) prayers for each other. Call time on this Listening exercise at the end of 15 minutes. ▶ 15 minutes

Exploring

If participants have had a chance to obtain the resource *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations* ahead of time, **ask if anyone is willing to present a brief summary** of pages 1–8. Then ask if anyone else has anything to add to the summary. If the resource has not been available ahead of time, the leader should prepare a summary using the “Talking Points for Leaders” on page 7. The leader may refer to the “Talking Points for Leaders” to make sure that all the key points of the reading are mentioned. ▶ 10 minutes

Reflecting

- **Ask the following questions** for group discussion:
 - How do we know that God cares for the whole of creation?
 - Why do you think God gave human beings some responsibility for the rest of creation?
 - What are some examples that show the power humans have over creation?
 - What questions or reflections do you have about the reading?

▶ 10 minutes

Responding

Explain to participants that each session will have a recommended response that they may choose to work on during the time between group gatherings. The ideas and information gained through the study will be more meaningful if the participants carry out the recommended actions. Suggest that keeping a journal is a good way to record their responses.

Read aloud the following section from Job 12:7–9

*But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
The birds of the air, and they will tell you;
Ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
And the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord
has done this?*

Explain that God chooses the natural world as a canvas for self-revelation. We can learn about the character and nature of God through studying the creation.

During the week ahead, participants are asked to observe instances of God’s revelation through creation and to keep notes of their observations in a journal or on an index card to be brought to the next gathering. Along with the observations, participants may note what insight into God’s nature, character, or plan is revealed in nature. Examples may include:

▶ 8 minutes

Observation	Insight
Multicolored autumn leaves	Beauty and variety of creation
Violent thunderstorm	God’s power and strength
Small plant in the crack of a city sidewalk	God cares for the smallest and least powerful parts of creation
A vegetable garden	Different aspects of creation are interdependent (the garden requires tending and in turn provides sustenance for the gardener and the community)

Closing

- **Pray a prayer of thanksgiving** to God for each aspect of creation.
- **Ask participants to read pages 9–11** of *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations* for the next gathering.

▶ 2 minutes

Listening

Genesis 1:26–31

Read

²⁶Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’

²⁷So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’

²⁹God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.’ ³⁰And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. ³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Read the text two or three times, underlining any words or phrases that stand out for you.

Reflect

Jot down your responses to these questions:

- What is surprising about this passage?

- What questions do you have about the passage?

- What do you find in the passage that makes you grateful to God?

Respond

What message does this passage have for your life?

Pray

What prayer requests do you have?

Introduction and “The Original Human Vocation,” pages 1–8

1. Creation belongs to God (Genesis 1 and 2; Psalm 8)
2. Human beings have a great deal of power (“dominion”) over the creation (Genesis 1:26–30; Psalm 8:6).
3. Human dominion is meant to imitate the kind of dominion God exercises over creation, a dominion marked by care and respect.
4. God does not relinquish love and care for the creation (John 3:16–17; 2 Corinthians 5:18–20; Colossians 1:15–20; Psalm 96).
5. Human sin has disrupted all relationships, including the one between human beings and the rest of creation.
6. God’s plan for reconciliation and redemption involves the entire creation, not just the human part.
7. The original human vocation is caring for the garden as God cares for the whole creation. The way humans exercise this earth care is to be in imitation of God’s care for the whole creation, which involves respect and responsibility.

Lost

Session 2

Scripture: Genesis 3

Theme: Human beings disobey God by eating the forbidden fruit, and the rightness of relationship ordained in creation is broken. As a result humans lose their special place in the garden. However, God does not desert God's creation.

Materials Needed: Copies of pages 10 and 11 of this study guide, pencils or pens, newsprint pad and marker, modeling clay or play dough

Preparation: Participants will read pages 9–11 of *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations*.

Opening

- **Open** with prayer.
- **Review the previous session.**
- **Ask participants** what they have observed about God's revelation through nature during the week. Allow time for a few people to report on their observations. Ask a group member to record the responses on newsprint. In each case, prompt the reporter with the following questions if needed:
 - What did you observe about God's creation this week?
 - What insight into the nature of God did you gather from your observation?
- **Pass out pieces of clay** or play dough and ask participants to model some element of creation that they have noticed in the past week. Ask people, if they are willing, to show and tell about their creations. Ask the following questions of the entire group:
 - How does it feel to create something?
 - How would you feel if someone in the group destroyed or laughed at what you just made?
- **Introduce the theme for Session 2.**

► 20 minutes

Listening

Pass out copies of the Listening exercise on page 10. Ask someone in the group to read the passage aloud as others follow along. Allow 5 minutes of silence while everyone makes brief notes in the Reflect, Respond, and Pray sections. Then ask each participant to work with a partner, sharing some of his or her thoughts and reflections. Ask the partners each to share one prayer request with each other and then close their time together by praying brief (one-sentence) prayers for each other. Call time on this Listening exercise at the end of 15 minutes

► 15 minutes

Exploring

Ask if someone can summarize pages 9–11 of *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations*. When that person has finished summarizing, ask if anyone else has anything to add to the summary. The leader may refer to the "Talking Points for Leaders" to make sure that all the key points of the reading are mentioned.

► 10 minutes

Reflecting

Ask the participants to reflect on the Scripture passages and the reading by responding to the following questions:

- Why do you think God loves the world (cosmos) so much?
- What are some ways we can see the broken covenant between God and the creation?
- How does human activity upset the balance of creation?
- How have humans done in their role as stewards of God's creation? Give examples.
- In what ways do the poorest people and groups suffer the most when natural processes are damaged or ignored?

► 10 minutes

Responding

The Response activity involves identifying examples of brokenness in the human relationship with the creation. During the week ahead observe in your reading of newspapers and magazines, listening to the radio, watching television, browsing the Internet, or observing the world around you examples of the relationship between human beings and the natural world being broken or disturbed. Notice that the poorest and most vulnerable people of the world are disproportionately impacted by natural disasters and environmental degradation. Make note of your observations on a note card or in your journal. Be prepared to report on one example at the next session. Pray daily for God's healing of the brokenness of creation.

► 3 minutes

Closing

Pray A Litany of Sorrow (page 11) as a unison prayer of confession.

Ask participants to read chapter 3 of *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations* (pages 12–26) for the next gathering.

► 2 minutes

Listening

Genesis 3:6–13

Read

⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

⁸They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' ¹⁰He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' ¹¹He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' ¹³Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.'

Read the passage two or three times, underlining any words or phrases that stand out to you.

Reflect

Jot down brief responses to the following questions:

- Why do you think the man and woman hid from God?
- Why do the man and woman feel the need for clothing for the first time?
- What kind of wisdom do the man and woman gain from the tree?

Respond

What message does this passage have for your life?

Pray

What prayer requests do you have?

A Litany of Sorrow

Leader:

We have forgotten who we are
We have alienated ourselves from the unfolding of the cosmos
We have become estranged from the movements of the earth
We have turned our backs on the cycles of life.

Response: We have forgotten who we are.

Leader:

We have sought only our own security
We have exploited simply for our own ends
We have distorted our knowledge
We have abused our power.

Response: We have forgotten who we are.

Leader:

Now the land is barren
And the waters are poisoned
And the air is polluted.

Response: We have forgotten who we are.

Leader:

Now the forests are dying
And the creatures are disappearing
And humans are despairing.

Response: We have forgotten who we are.

Leader:

We ask forgiveness
We ask for the gift of remembering
We ask for the strength to change.

Response: We have forgotten who we are.

(Allow for a period of silence)

“The Human Vocation Lost and Reestablished,” pages 9–11

1. Human creatures come from the earth and are given life by God.
2. The original human vocation is “to till and to keep” the Garden of Eden.
3. The only prohibited plant in the Garden is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
4. Human disobedience toward God has consequences including:
 - Fear
 - Blame
 - Shame
 - Difficulty in childbearing
 - Difficulty in raising food
 - Curse on the ground
 - Expulsion from the garden
 - Broken relationships
 - Broken trust in God
 - Control and ignorance of nature
 - Violence
5. Knowledge of good and evil is not a list of rules but a relationship with God that was broken at the time of disobedience.
6. Despite the fallen condition, God continues to be faithful—the vocation of tilling and keeping the land continues outside of Eden.
7. In the Noah story God punishes and then restores, making a new covenant with Noah and lifting the curse on the ground.

A Covenant Community

Session 3

<i>Scripture:</i>	Exodus 20:8–11 Psalm 19
<i>Theme:</i>	God’s plan for life on earth involves right relationships among God, humans, and the rest of creation. Sabbath keeping and eco-justice sustain right relationships.
<i>Materials Needed:</i>	Newsprint pad and marker, pencils or pens, copies of pages 15 and 16-17 of this study guide.
<i>Preparation:</i>	Participants will read pages 12–26 of <i>And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations</i> .

Opening

- **Ask participants** what examples of brokenness between human beings and the natural world they observed during the week. Make a list of the situations named on the newsprint pad.
- **Pray** for the study time and for the situations of brokenness mentioned by the participants and for the poor and vulnerable people of the world.
- **Ask:** How can these situations mentioned inform the work that we can do as a community to heal creation?
- **Ask** participants to recall times in their lives when they have felt exhausted and overwhelmed. What were the events or circumstances that contributed to those feelings? Then ask participants to recall times when they felt renewed and refreshed. What circumstances contributed to those feelings? Ask for people to share aloud specific examples if they are willing.
- **Introduce the theme for Session 3.**

► 15 minutes

Listening

- **Pass out copies of the Listening exercise on page 15.** Ask someone in the group to read the passage aloud as others follow along. Allow 5 minutes of silence while everyone makes brief notes in the Reflect, Respond, and Pray sections. Then ask each participant to work with a partner, sharing some of his or her thoughts and reflections. Ask the partners each to share one prayer request with each other and then close their time together by praying brief (one-sentence) prayers for each other. Call time on this Listening exercise at the end of 15 minutes

► 15 minutes

Exploring

- **Ask participants** if anyone can provide an overview of pages 12–26 of *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations*. The leader may refer to the “Talking Points for Leaders” to make sure that all the key points of the reading are mentioned.

- Pass out copies of pages 16-17, and allow a few minutes for the participants to read the information on Sabbath keeping provided, underlining words or phrases that are particularly meaningful to them.

► 15 minutes

Reflecting

- Lead a group discussion using the following questions:
 - What comments about Sabbath were meaningful to you? Why?
 - What experiences have you had in your life of Sabbath keeping?
 - Why is Sabbath important to God, to people, and to the earth?
 - What unique challenges to Sabbath keeping do we face as 21st-century North American Christians?
 - What changes would you like to make in the way you observe the Sabbath?

► 8 minutes

Responding

Explain that making a commitment to honor the Sabbath requires significant lifestyle change. It is not a decision to be taken lightly. Hence, there is no simple “homework assignment.” For those who sense that Sabbath keeping may be a step in their discipleship journeys, here is an outline of steps that might lead them forward in that journey. Make a copy of these steps for each participant.

1. Pray that God would plant in your heart a desire to obey the 4th commandment and make it possible for you to begin the journey of Sabbath keeping.
2. Read Exodus 20:8–11 each day for a week.
3. Spend time in silence each day listening to the message God has for you.
4. In your journal make a list of ways that you would want

the Sabbath day to be different from all other days for you.

5. Spend some time enjoying God’s creation and reflecting on the connection between Sabbath and creation.
6. Develop a schedule for the chores of your week so that you can find a way of getting them done without working on the Sabbath day. Write this in your journal.
7. Share with an accountability partner what specific changes you plan to make in your weekly schedule so that Sabbath keeping can begin to have new meaning for you.
8. Pray with your partner for God’s help as you begin to implement these changes in your life.

► 5 minutes

2 minutes Closing

• Close in prayer

- **Explain** that the next chapter, “Continuity in Christianity,” pages 27–31, is both elegant and complex. It merits careful reading before the next group meeting. Ask participants to read the chapter and make note of questions and observations they have before the next session.

► 2 minutes

Listening

Exodus 20:8–11

Read

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹For six days you shall labour and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

¹¹For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Read the passage two or three times, underlining any words or phrases that stand out to you.

Reflect

Jot down brief responses to the following questions:

- Why do you think the Sabbath keeping commandment is the longest and most detailed of all the commandments?

- How does this commandment reflect God's care for creation?

Respond

What message does this passage have for your life?

Pray

What prayer requests do you have?

Some Words on Sabbath

Below you will find several comments on Sabbath keeping from various writers that have been selected to help readers contemplate the disciple-making potential of this ancient practice as well as the relationship between Sabbath keeping and honoring the creation.

- I. The Sabbath, more than any other single religious practice, has functioned in Judaism (and to some extent in Christianity) to keep life balanced. Its essence is to refrain from changing the world [i.e., working] one day out of seven, to honor God the creator and God's own enjoyment of what God made. Negatively, it helps mitigate the exploitation of servants and domestic animals by mandating rest for them, and it helps compulsive workers to do the same for themselves. Positively, it allows the entire community, as a community, to relax and let go of trying to control life, and instead enjoy and commune with creation, with each other, and with God. It brings into the covenantal life a sacramental dimension of communion with God and creation through the Sabbath peace, or the shalom of God. (Johnston, p.13)
- II. The meaning of Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world. (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, Boston: Shambhala, 2003, p xviii)

Creation is the language of God. Time is the song, and the things of space the consonants in the song. To

sanctify time is to sing the vowels in unison with Him. (Ibid, p. 93)

- III. Jewish liturgy and law say both what should be done on Shabbat and what should not. What should not be done is "work." Defining exactly what that means is a long and continuing argument, but one classic answer is that work is whatever requires changing the natural, material world. All week long, human beings wrestle with the natural world, tilling and hammering and carrying and burning. On the Sabbath, however, Jews let it be. They celebrate it as it is and live in it in peace and gratitude. Humans are created too, after all, and in gratefully receiving the gift of the world, they learn to remember that it is not, finally, human effort that grows the grain and forges the steel. By extension, all activities associated with work or commerce are prohibited. You are not even supposed to think about them.

What should be done? Specific religious duties do exist, including worship at synagogue and reading of the Torah. But the holiness of the Sabbath is also made manifest in the joy people expect to experience on that day. It is a good deed for married couples to have sexual intercourse on Shabbat. Taking a walk, resting, talking with loved ones, reading—these are good too.

To the eyes of outsiders, Jewish observance of the Sabbath can seem like a dreary set of restrictions, a set of

laws that don't bear any good news. According to those who live each week shaped by Shabbat, however, it is a practice that powerfully alters their relationships to nature, work, God and others.

(Dorothy C. Bass, ed., "Keeping Sabbath," in *Practicing our Faith*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1999, 80–81, used by permission).

“The Vocation of Israel: Living Rightly in the Land,” pages 12-26

1. The journey from Egypt into Canaan involves the transformation of a slave people into a free people.
2. The Torah (including the Ten Commandments) is a gift from God that enables God’s people to live in right relationships with each other, with God, and with the whole creation.
3. The practice of Sabbath builds community and provides space for right relationships to grow (Leviticus 25–26).
4. When right relationships are broken, the people, the community, and the creation all suffer (Leviticus 26:20–35).
5. The book of Psalms is filled with observations about God and nature (Psslms 1, 8, 19, 36, 37).
6. The prophets call the community to restore the covenantal relationship with God and with the land (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Hosea, Micah).

A New Creation through Christ

Session 4

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:17–20

Theme: Jesus' work involves the redemption of the whole creation. All things in heaven and earth are redeemed, reconciled, and liberated through the death and resurrection of the Christ.

Materials Needed: Pencils or pens, copies of page 21 in this study guide

Preparation: Participants will read pages 27–31 of *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations*.

Opening

- **Open with prayer.**
- **Ask participants** to report their reflections on Sabbath. The leader can begin the conversation by asking one or more of the following questions:
 - What is something you did last Sunday (or whatever day you kept as Sabbath) that helped you grow closer to God and God's creation?
 - What are some things that you would like to eliminate from your day of Sabbath? Why?
 - What changes in your life would have to take place in order for you to more fully enjoy Sabbath keeping?
 - How can Sabbath help you to grow closer to nature and to the poor and vulnerable people of the world?
- **Introduce the theme for Session 4.** ▶ 10 minutes

Listening

Pass out copies of the Listening exercise on page 21. Ask someone in the group to read the passage aloud as others follow along. Allow 5 minutes of silence while everyone makes brief notes in the Reflect, Respond, and Pray sections. Then ask each participant to work with a partner, sharing some of his or her thoughts and reflections. Ask the partners each to share one prayer request with each other and then close their time together by praying brief (one-sentence) prayers for each other. Call time on this Listening exercise at the end of 15 minutes

▶ 15 minutes

Exploring

Ask someone to give a brief summary of the chapter, "Continuity in Christianity," pages 27–31. Be prepared to add to the summary using the Talking Points for Leaders on page 22.

▶ 10 minutes

Reflecting

Lead a group discussion using the following questions:

- What did you read in the chapter that you want to highlight?
- From your knowledge of the Gospel stories, what examples can you give of Jesus' harmony with nature? (The leader can point out the following passages to get the conversation started: Matthew 7:15–20; Mark 4:36–41; Matthew 13; John 6:16–21; John 15:1–17.)
- How does Jesus show concern for the poor and vulnerable of the world? (The leader can point out the following passages: Matthew 25:34–46; Luke 4:14–21; Luke 16:19–31.)
- How can a Christian community reflect the harmony with nature and with the poor and vulnerable of the world that Christ models?

Point to the bottom of page 29 of *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations* where Carol Johnston quotes John 20:14–15a and then asks two questions: “What if Mary was not wrong? What if Jesus is the Gardener?” Ask participants to reflect aloud on these questions.

Responding

Point out to the group that our study leads us to conclude that God intends reconciliation for all people and for all of creation, the whole cosmos. It is clear that this vast scope of reconciliation can be accomplished only by God. Human efforts alone cannot begin to address the cosmic scale of the brokenness that exists in the world today. Yet God calls God's people to be co-creators in the world. We are called to join God in the work of reconciliation. One place to start in your journey toward being more faithful in earth care is within your own congregation. Ask each participant to look for places in their own areas of ministry where the church could do a better job of modeling earth care and to make note of those observations.

Point out that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) provides many resources for its members and congregations that will help them to become more environmentally conscious organizations. This consciousness may begin with an environmental audit of your own congregation. One do-it-yourself guide for an energy audit of your congregation can be found at the following website: <http://kansasipl.org/resources/energy-audit/>.

Suggest that people take a look at this audit during the week and begin to explore ways your congregation can take some steps toward increased care for creation.

More resources can be found at the PC(USA) Environmental Ministries website at www.pcusa.org/environment and at the Presbyterians for Earth Care website at www.presbyearthcare.org.

► 8 minutes

Closing

- **Pray** that you will find ways of taking a small step in the direction toward becoming a more environmentally conscious congregation.
- **Ask** participants to read the chapter “Theological Leads from the Biblical Texts,” pages 32–35 of *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations*.

► 2 minutes

Listening

2 Corinthians 5:17–20

Read

¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Read the passage two or three times, underlining any words or phrases that stand out to you.

Reflect

Jot down brief responses to the following questions:

- What does it mean that God is reconciling the world?

- How can we be ambassadors for Christ in this job of reconciliation?

Respond

What message does this passage have for your life?

Pray

What prayer requests do you have?

“Continuity in Christianity,” pages 27–31

1. The prophetic books of the Old Testament indicate God’s plan for a restoration of creation.
2. Jesus announces his call to fulfill Old Testament prophecy. Restoration of creation is central to Christ’s ministry.
3. Jesus reflects the Wisdom tradition of illustrating his teaching with examples from nature, culminating in the sacramental remembrance through bread and wine.
4. Jesus calls humans to participate in the work of the reconciliation of creation, the same work given to the first humans at the time of creation.
5. Torah, a gift from God, provides guidance in living rightly with each other and with the whole of creation.
6. Jesus modeled a unity with nature.
7. All of creation is included in the redemption and salvation Jesus brings.
8. The final vision of reconciliation in Revelation includes a new heaven and a new earth.

Living in Just Communities

Session 5

Scripture:

Romans 8:18–39
Revelation 21:1–7

Theme:

God intends to restore right relationships in the creation. People of faith are called to live in communities that reflect the love and justice of God.

Materials Needed:

Newsprint pad and marker, pencils or pens, copies of pages 25, 26, and 27–29 of this study guide

Preparation:

Participants will read pages 32–35 of *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations*.

Opening

- **Begin with prayer.**
- **Ask participants** to report on their discoveries during the preceding week concerning ways the congregation can become more environmentally conscious through various aspects of its program. Make notes on newsprint pad.
- **Introduce the theme of session 5.**

► 10 minutes

Listening

Pass out copies of the Listening exercise on page 25. Ask someone in the group to read the passage aloud as others follow along. Allow five minutes of silence while everyone makes brief notes in the Reflect, Respond, and Pray sections. Then ask each participant to work with a partner, sharing some of his or her thoughts and reflections. Ask the partners each to share one prayer request with each other and then close their time together by praying brief (one-sentence) prayers for each other. Call time on this Listening exercise at the end of 13 minutes.

► 13 minutes

Exploring

Ask someone to give a brief summary of the chapter, “Theological Leads from the Biblical Texts,” pages 32–35. Be prepared to add to the summary using the Talking Points for Leaders on page 30.

► 10 minutes

Reflecting

- **Read the following quotation** from Carol Johnston aloud: “God does not leave human beings helpless in the face of sin. Steadfastly, God provides ways for human beings to live in relatively just communities and to care for the land and nature around them...Far from being an escape from ‘this world’ and its finitude, redemption...involves the reestablishment of human beings in right relationship, or ‘righteousness’ and ‘justice,’ with God, each other, and the land.” (p. 33)

- Ask participants to respond to the following questions:
 - What can you, as a Christian community, do that shows your alignment with the gospel message of reconciliation for all of creation?
 - What has your church or community done to become reconciled with God's creation?
 - What activities can you initiate or support that reflect your call to develop a spirit of reconciliation with the creation?
 - How can your congregation's earth care efforts involve other nations and cultures?

► 10 minutes

Responding

Now that this study is coming to a close, perhaps new interest has developed in becoming a more environmentally faithful organization. **Find out whether there is interest in starting an earth care team** in your congregation or community. This could be a brand-new entity or it could become part of the work of your ongoing social justice committee or your peacemaking committee. Pass out copies of page 26 for suggestions on how you can get an earth care group started in your church or community. Pass out copies of pages 27-28, "Earth Care: What can we do?" to provide some ideas for action plans for your group. Ask one or more people to take the lead in forming this new discipleship initiative.

► 15 minutes

2 minutes Closing

Close by reading in unison the Affirmation of Faith on page 29.

► 2 minutes

Listening

Romans 8:18–25

Read

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Read the passage two or three times, underlining any words or phrases that stand out to you.

Reflect

Jot down brief responses to the following questions:

- How do we know the creation suffers?

- What hopes do you have for God's creation?

- What hopes do you have for your own life?

Respond

What message does this passage have for your life?

Pray

What prayer requests do you have?

Earth Care Team

Getting Started

1. Pray that God will call together a group of people in your church or community interested in forming a team for earth care.
2. Personally invite two or three other people who have interest in earth care to join you in your prayers for the creation of this team.
3. Meet with this small group to pray and to engage in some of the Bible studies used in this resource. After praying, discuss names of some other people who might be interested in this area of discipleship. Make personal invitations to these other people to join you in your prayers and study. Consider the structure of your congregation to decide who needs to be involved in decision-making on earth care issues, and include these people in your invitations.
4. Arrange to provide minutes for mission and newsletter articles announcing your intention to begin an earth care team (or a group with a similar name that best fits your congregation). Invite people to an initial gathering.
5. At the first meeting, pass out copies of *And the Leaves of the Tree Are for the Healing of the Nations*. Ask people to commit to a specific time period for reading the book and praying for God's creation and for the new group that is forming.
6. Begin to discern specific concerns the people in your group share. Decide whether there is an action item that the group feels called to take. It could involve ongoing study, education of others, a worship emphasis, or organizing around a specific local or international issue.
7. The following resources will provide you with plenty of ideas to get you started with this new discipleship initiative.
 - Environmental Ministries, PC(USA): www.pcusa.org/environment
 - Presbyterians for Earth Care: www.presbyearthcare.org
 - Enough for Everyone, PC(USA): www.pcusa.org/enough
 - National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program Resources: www.nccecojustice.org/resources
 - Kansas Interfaith Power and Light Resources: <http://kansasipl.org/resources/energy-audit/>
 - Web of Creation Resources: www.webofcreation.org/Worship/resources.htm

Earth Care: What can we do?

As congregations, we can . . .

- Pray for the healing and restoration of all God’s creation.
- Read Scripture to discover more about God’s own love and care for the creation.
- Save energy by turning off lights and turning down thermostats.
- Recycle plastic, glass, and paper.
- Replace incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent lights.
- Conduct an energy audit of your facility and implement suggestions.
- Coordinate ride-sharing for members.
- Review the facility’s water bills and graph how much water the facility uses each month. Discuss ways of reducing the consumption.
- Contact the local water authority and find out what kind of assistance and rebates are available to assist with water use reduction.
- Work with the church budget committee to appropriate money to purchase low-flow plumbing fixtures and toilets.
- Support vendors who stock recycled paper, recycled toner cartridges, and other environmentally preferred products.
- Distribute the church’s newsletter electronically instead of on paper.
- Participate in the Presbyterian Coffee Project: www.pcusa.org/coffee.
- Buy Eco-Palms for Palm Sunday through the Eco-Palm Project: www.pcusa.org/palms.
- Start a community garden and donate some of the harvest to a local food bank.
- Buy locally grown and organic produce for church meals.
- Involve youth in service projects related to earth care.
- Hold a speaker series on earth care and incorporate earth

- care issues in the Christian Education curriculum.
- Use reusable dishes at church functions rather than disposables.
- Plant on church grounds native species that do not require much water.
- Use natural cleaners in church facilities.
- Plan a mission trip related to environmental issues.
- Pray for the poor and vulnerable.
- Develop a church partnership with a church in a developing country that faces severe environmental issues.
- Hold an earth care tour of your local landfill.
- Celebrate Earth Day the Sunday before or after April 22. For resources go to: www.pcusa.org/environment
- Have your congregation join Presbyterians for Earth Care, a grassroots Eco-Justice Network, as a group member. Learn more at www.presbyearthcare.org/join-membership.html.

As individuals and families we can . . .

- Pray for the healing and restoration of all God’s creation.
- Pray for people in the world who suffer because of environmental issues.
- Save energy by turning off lights and adjusting thermostats.
- Replace incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent lights.
- Drive less, and walk or bicycle more.
- Recycle plastic, glass, and paper.
- Create less garbage.
- Plant a garden.
- Eat locally grown food.
- Purchase more energy-efficient cars and appliances.
- Discover ways of having fun without using electricity or fuel.
- Advocate for environmental issues. Learn more through the Presbyterian Washington Office at www.pcusa.org/washington.

- Install a rain barrel to use rainwater for watering needs.
- Mow your lawn with a reel or electric mower.
- Purchase Fair Trade products.
- Subscribe to the Environmental Ministries e-newsletter at www.pcusa.org/environment/subscribe.htm.
- Read the Environmental Ministries blog at www.presbyterian.typepad.com/ecojourney.
- Become a member of Presbyterians for Earth Care, a grassroots Eco-Justice Network. Learn more at www.presbyearthcare.org/join-membership.html.

As communities, we can . . .

- Organize carpools.
- Plan outdoor, community activities.
- Plant and tend a community garden.
- Inform ourselves about public policy issues related to earth care.
- Listen to candidates for public office and vote with an earth care conscience.
- Organize a Community Supported Agriculture network.
- Advocate for improved public transportation.

Affirmation of Faith

I believe in God, the Creator and Lord of all that is.
In your hand is the life of every thing--
of trees and plants, animals and insects--
and the breath of every human being.

I believe in Jesus the Christ, the Redeemer of all that we have
damaged,
our broken souls and our broken world,
who offers new life when we love our neighbors,
neighbors sun and soil, water and air.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Sustainer of this community
and future generations,
and the source of hope and courage to care about creation,
especially when sustainability seems hopeless.

We promise to work together and with God, to be stewards
of this gift, our home.

(written by 2009 Eco Stewards for the Faith and Environment Conference,
Montreat, N.C.)

“Theological Leads from the Biblical Texts,” pages 32–35

1. Creation is important to the entire witness of the Bible.
2. We understand salvation differently when we read Scripture from an eco-justice perspective—we see that salvation includes the whole cosmos.
3. Human beings are related to God, to each other, and to the rest of creation.
4. Because of sin, humans continually get their relations with nature wrong.
5. Not just humans but all of creation is intended to glorify God.
6. Because of the brokenness of relationships caused by sin, human beings either fight with nature or worship it—both are wrong.
7. God intends for humans to live in just communities, caring for land and nature.
8. As redeemed human beings we work for the reconciliation of the earth community.

*Excerpted from Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice
Adopted by the 202nd General Assembly (1990) of the Presbyterian
Church (U.S.A.)*

Creation cries out in this time of ecological crisis.

- Abuse of nature and injustice to people place the future in grave jeopardy.
- Population triples in this century.
- Biological systems suffer diminished capacity to renew themselves.
- Finite minerals are mined and pumped as if inexhaustible.
- Peasants are forced onto marginal lands, and soil erodes.
- The rich-poor gap grows wider.
- Wastes and poisons exceed nature's capacity to absorb them.
- Greenhouse gases pose threat of global warming.

Therefore, God calls the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to respond to the cry of creation, human and non-human;

- engage in the effort to make the 1990s the "turnaround decade," not only for reasons of prudence or survival, but because the endangered planet is God's creation; and
- draw upon all the resources of biblical faith and the Reformed tradition for empowerment and guidance in this adventure.

The church has powerful reason for engagement in restoring God's creation:

- God's works in creation are too wonderful, too ancient, too beautiful, too good to be desecrated.
- Restoring creation is God's own work in our time, in which God comes both to judge and to restore.
- The Creator-Redeemer calls faithful people to become engaged with God in keeping and healing the creation, human and nonhuman.
- Human life and well-being depend upon the flourishing of other life and the integrity of the life-supporting processes that God has ordained.
- The love of neighbor, particularly "the least" of Christ's brothers and sisters, requires action to stop the poisoning, the erosion, the wastefulness that are causing suffering and death.
- The future of our children and their children and all who come after is at stake.
- In this critical tune of transition to a new era, God's new doing may be discerned as a call to earth-keeping, to justice, and to community.

Therefore, the 202nd General Assembly affirms that:

- Response to God's call requires a new faithfulness, for which guidance may be found in norms that illuminate the contemporary meaning of God's steadfast love for the world.
- Earth-keeping today means insisting on sustainability the ongoing capacity of natural and social systems to thrive together—which requires human beings to practice wise, humble, responsible stewardship, after the model of servanthood that we have in Jesus.

- Justice today requires participation, the inclusion of all members of the human family in obtaining and enjoying the Creator's gifts for sustenance.
- Justice also means sufficiency, a standard upholding the claim of all to have enough—to be met through equitable sharing and organized efforts to achieve that end.
- Community in our time requires the nurture of solidarity, leading to steadfastness in standing with companions, victims, and allies, and to the realization of the church's potential as a community of support for adventurous faithfulness.

On the basis of these findings and affirmations the 202nd General Assembly (1990)

- recognizes and accepts restoring creation as a central concern of the church, to be incorporated into its life and mission at every level;
- understands this to be a new focus for initiative in mission program and a concern with major implications for infusion into theological work, evangelism, education, justice and peacemaking, worship and liturgy, public witness, global mission, and congregational service and action at the local community level;

- recognizes that restoring creation is not a short-term concern to be handled in a few years, but a continuing task to which the nation and the world must give attention and commitment, and which has profound implications for the life, work, and witness of Christian people and church agencies;
- approaches the task with covenant seriousness—"If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God . . . then you shall live" (Deut. 30:16)—and with practical awareness that cherishing God's creation enhances the ability of the church to achieve its other goals.

The 202nd General Assembly (1990) believes God calls the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to engage in the tasks of restoring creation in the "turnaround decade" now beginning and for as long as God continues to call people of faith to undertake these tasks.