

# **TEACH CREATION CARE AND APPRECIATION**

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### Faith Formation Outdoors – Part of the Wesleyan Way

The waters nourishing modern camp and retreat ministry run deep within United Methodist heritage. They sprang forth unexpectedly in the 1730's when John Wesley made a fundamental decision that would launch the Methodist movement into the mainstream of an historic "spiritual awakening" flowing from Europe into North America. With colleagues, he boldly chose to move preaching and faith formation into the "open air" where the people would have new access and new opportunities to hear and respond to the Good News.

Religious folks in 18<sup>th</sup> century England deemed the idea dangerously radical. Moving central activities typically reserved to sanctuary buildings to the outdoors struck many as a vile profanity – a desecration of the holy. At first, even Wesley wrestled internally about the appropriateness of what he was doing. He writes in his journal, Saturday, March 31, 1731.

"In the evening I reached Bristol, and met Mr. Whitefield there. I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin, if it had not been done in a church." <sup>i</sup>

During a reading of the "The Sermon on the Mount", a realization eased Wesley's heart and mind. If Jesus often taught outdoors and trained his disciples there, then how could it be wrong? Christ himself, also, set the example of regular retreats into nature for prayer, discernment and renewal. On top of this Biblical recognition, there were the practical results. Masses of new people responded, and profound changes in their lives gave undeniable evidence that the Spirit was moving.

Nurturing faith in the outdoors - "field preaching" – was a very practical response to reaching more people and ended up being an amazing asset to the United Methodist Church. It is one key factor behind the expansion of the Methodist movement. Poor, rich, "rough necks", outcasts, and church folks alike gathered in crowds sometimes burgeoning over 3,000. This gathering of relative strangers and persons of very diverse backgrounds, many not used to attending church, would have been difficult to pull off in the highly structured services of England at the time.

Throughout his fifty years of ministry, Wesley partnered with other leaders who joined the endeavor. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, drew closer to God and many adopted lifestyles of Christian love as a way of life. Faith formation experiences beyond the congregation and decisions to follow Christ were followed by the systematic encouragement to continue to grow as disciples through connections with small groups and local congregations. This continues

to be a crucial dimension of the long standing partnerships between Christian camp and retreat centers and local congregations, even today.

Have you noticed that the vast majority of faith-based camp and retreat centers are located within or adjacent to natural surroundings? Even where civilization has encroached, center staff and volunteers plant gardens to assure that nature remains. This is no accident. Other movements that have historically contributed to what has become modern day camp and retreat ministries, intentionally sought opportunities to spend time outdoors, including the Camp Meeting, Chataqua, Scouting, and Epworth League movements. The United Methodist Church now has a network of over 225 camp and retreat centers in the US and beyond.

Of course, such environments are beautiful and frequently peaceful. They, also, allow people to come to a place apart from the rigors and responsibilities that might, otherwise, disrupt a focus on Spiritual growth. Even more, the Church intentionally wants people to enter the creation because of the growing recognition that the natural world actually speaks of the Creator. Multitudes sense God's presence afresh, while in the midst of nature.

It is crucial for camp and retreat leaders to perceive and value the unparalleled Spiritual benefits of having persons spend time outdoors as part of the process of seeking God and being found by God. The creation often sparks joy and thanksgiving. Faith communities have discovered time and time again that the natural world is a powerful avenue of God's self-revelation. Nature renews, stirs a sense of awe, and reveals insights into the meaning of life.

The consistent stories from those impacted by these sacred times and spaces have moved the Christian church for centuries to provide cherished camp and retreat centers within pristine environments. In modern times, it is more and more imperative for people to be in touch with God's wider community of creation, the animals, plants, mountains, etc., which are parts of the holy family of God. The world is steadily becoming urbanized as people move increasingly from rural settings and become town and city dwellers across the globe. Opportunities to appreciate the wilderness and nature are blocked from view, unless we intentionally lift them up.

As Christians, we are among those who recognize that the natural world, in all its variety, is beloved. God's embrace extends to the whole household of life. In a time when the human impact on the natural world reaches levels heretofore unimaginable in the history of our planet, it is crucial for the Church to step up boldly to rally the society to honor and value other creatures and ecosystems.

It is, also, poignantly relevant in our own time to reclaim and re-emphasize teachings that have sometimes been forgotten or ignored. Much of Christianity went through a period when the emphasis on heaven and human salvation alone caused a devaluation of the earth. This distortion resulting from a failure to give heed to a full reading of scripture was used to affirm the "conquering" and destruction of the natural world as part of the industrial revolution. It is important for us to recognize this error and in our repentance to be at the forefront now in honoring all of life as sacred and important. In God's design, nature nurtures

Christian discipleship and in turn one of the ways Christian discipleship expresses itself is in love for the earth and stewardship of all that God has made.

Christian Camp and Retreat Centers are uniquely poised to be a catalyst for positive change, because of our settings and our role within the ministry of the broader Church. Ultimately, guests, participants and leaders carry their camp and retreat experiences back with them as they return to inspire their families, local congregations, communities, workplaces, and the wider world. Currently, United Methodist Camp and Retreat Ministries serve nearly a million people every year, who then return to shape the society. It is important that we inspire these persons to lead the world and the church for they will have a big influence wherever they go.

Let's take a deeper look into the scriptures and Christian teachings for clues to how nature plays an important role in forming faith and Christian discipleship. A number of themes emerge as particularly applicable.

## **Scriptural and Theological Exploration** **for Camp and Retreat Leaders**

### **A. Encourage People to Listen in New Ways, because the Creation Speaks of God**

**Psalm 19:1 The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. 2 Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. 3 There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; 4 yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.**

The Psalmist highlights an abiding feature of nature, if we have the ears to hear it. The creation is constantly telling the glory of God. Part of camp/retreat ministry's purpose is to encourage persons to observe more deeply. We teach ways to become a part of, to recognize, and to "listen" to the voice of nature, which has its own language and way of communicating.

**\*\*John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.**

Here, the writer of John makes an inseparable link between Christ and all of creation. All things come into being through the Word – the life-giving, creative dimension of God. The Word, which was with God and was God, sparks the

creation. The Gospel writer shares the good news that the same Word lived among us in Jesus whose continual presence abides in Spirit. The natural world, then, is one expression – a communication – a reflection of its Creator. All this diversity of life is understood to be a sacred light from God. In a real way then, it cooperates with Christ to point us toward the Creator. All life is an expression of God – a voice of God - an avenue to a deeper connection with God.

As the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Christian teacher, Meister Eckhart, said so well,

“Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God. Every creature is a word of God. If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature – even a caterpillar – I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature.” *Meister Eckhart (1260-1329)*.<sup>ii</sup>

What God brings into being, therefore, deserves our utmost respect and effort to preserve. Every species has messages from God and much to say about God, because they are expressions of the Source of All. Great Christian hymns such as, “This is Our Father’s World”, echo some of these long-standing teachings, in lyrics like “All nature sings” and “God speaks to me everywhere”.<sup>iii</sup> Modern hymns continue that tradition, such as, “God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale.”

In the Biblical understanding, other species also praise God in their own way. This affirms that humans are not the only creatures who deserve the right to live and relate with their Creator. The Psalmist includes creatures and elements of nature among those praising God (Psalm 148). A core element of the camp and retreat ministry is to help our guests, participants and congregations ponder the degree to which other creatures and the wilderness speak and support the spiritual welfare of all, which goes far beyond just being a resource for human industry and production. Getting to know aspects of the natural world through greater observation, education and appreciation leads us to new knowledge and thanksgiving for the Creator and the plethora of ways that God brings life.

In Romans (1:20-23, 25), the Apostle Paul confirms even more directly that people can come to know God’s divinity and power through the creation - what God has made. Of Course, we never worship the natural world or the earth as the totality of God anymore than we would worship ourselves or another human being in place of God. Some have a misconception that by inviting people to go into natural settings we risk drawing them away from God, when the opposite is true. The key to avoiding misunderstanding is to be very clear that nature leads us to recognize and worship the Creator. We never encourage people to idolize animals, plants, the earth, etc. any more than we would worship humanity. With this clearly in mind, we emphasize the goodness of the natural world and engage persons in spiritual practices that affirm creation as one of the ways through which God loves us, blesses us, and draws us near.

## **B. Provide People the Opportunity to Learn More About the Natural World for It is A Source of Wisdom**

In addition to telling the glory of God, scriptures point to the diversity of creatures and ecosystems as sources of Divine wisdom and instruction. Other forms of life can be our mentors offering essential lessons on life, if we humans are humble enough to be receptive. Here are just a few examples from the Bible of well-known Spiritual mentors passing on lessons they gain from time spent reflecting on the natural world.

**1 Kings 4: 29 God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, 30 so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. 31 He was wiser than anyone else, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, children of Mahol; his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations. 32 He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. 33 He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. 34 People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.**

When Solomon became king, God asked him what he wanted. Solomon only asked for wisdom to lead the people well. The Lord honored his heartfelt request and he became one of the wisest persons who ever lived. A great deal of his wisdom came from lessons gained from observing plants, birds, reptiles, fish and a myriad of other aspects of our wider world. We not only learn scientifically from observing nature, which is a very important step along the way. We, also, learn spiritual truths, since all life has its origins in The Source of Life. Other biblical texts indicate that nature can be an avenue of divine insight, from Job telling his companions to “ask the animals, and they will teach you” (Job 12:7-10) to Jesus who frequently used observations on nature as parables for the Kingdom of God.

What present and future lessons and benefits from God are we obliterating because of our lack of care and respect for other forms of life? Faith and biological issues intersect in the loving and life giving intentions of God.

### **C. Expand the Meaning of Beloved Community:**

Scripture and Christian tradition depict creation as a process that births a community, not human beings in isolation. Although we do not have room here to print all the verses of **Genesis Chapters One and Two and Psalm 8**, we encourage you to read these accounts. In Genesis one, each part of creation is deemed good by God in their own right, even before human beings come on the scene. In the first creation account, we actually share our “day” of creation with other land animals.

In Genesis Chapter two, our connection with the earth and the rest of creation gets expressed in the fact that we are “made from the dust of the earth”. The word for earth or ground is “Adamah” in Hebrew, thus “Adam” – which represents humanity – “of the earth or ground”. All life, as we know it, is tied together. We are a part of each other both theologically, and as it turns out biologically. The basic elements of our make up pass from one generation to the next and from creature to creature. Humans do not exist without the wider world.

We are given special characteristics and roles within the whole that in some real ways give us “dominion” on this planet (Genesis 1:26) because of our creative intelligence. But any sense of dominion must be derived from our identity as ones made in the “image of God”. Our self-understanding and role is based on whom we understand God to be and God’s loving desire for the whole creation revealed in Christ. Nowhere does scripture declare that only human beings matter or that we can separate ourselves from the rest of what is in the heart of God. We are to be caretakers, not tyrants, as the people of God.

The following quote from John Wesley, who helped launch the Methodist movement in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, provides but one example of Christian theologians affirming God’s presence abiding with the whole creation.

*The great lesson that our blessed Lord inculcates here...is that God is in all things, and that we are to see the Creator in the glass of every creature; that we should use and look upon nothing as separate from God...but with a true magnificence of thought survey heaven and earth and all that is therein as contained by God in the hollow of his hand, who by his intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and activates the whole created frame, and is in a true sense the soul of the universe. Sermon on the Mount III (1748).<sup>iv</sup>*

God’s Intimate Presence holds all creation in being. Camp and retreat settings and experiences give wonderful opportunities to remind participants to “look upon nothing as separate from God.” In honoring the whole, we embrace God and ourselves, as well. The meaning of “neighbor” seems rightly extended to the rest of creation. The greatest commandment of our Christian faith to love God, to love our neighbor and to love ourselves takes on new breadth. This recognition can shape the practices, programs, and lifestyles lifted up in camp and retreat settings for learning and application everywhere participants with journey and live beyond the center. For people of faith, a fundamental teaching is that earth is the Lord’s – not ours. The whole universe is a good gift from God. (Psalm 24:1). It is not always easy to do with less in the balance of giving and receiving so that others may live, but we do so out of love.

#### **D. Introduce and Implement Practices of Earth Care that Honor God’s Covenants with Creation**

**Genesis 9: 11 I (the Lord) establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." 12 God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: 13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16 When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth."**

The Noah story brings to bear some interesting points. First, if you recall the entire story, it was human behavior that led God to determine that it was vital to make a new start. Just because there was a corruption of what was meant to be does not mean that everything is now worthless. In the story, the message is that God requires that the diversity of species be preserved for the future. God actually makes a covenant that goes far beyond humanity alone. The Lord makes covenant with the earth and every living creature. Cal Dewitt, the well-known Evangelical teacher and scientist, describes this commitment to the diversity of life as "the first endangered species act."

God has made other covenants with creation that are part of the way of the Spirit. For example, Leviticus 25:1-5 outlines the importance of honoring the right of the land to rest and to observe a Sabbath for the Lord. God wants the land, and in extension the natural world, to observe a Sabbath for the Lord. We know that human beings need food and other items for survival, but this does not eliminate the vital call for the natural world to enjoy all that is meant by Sabbath and wholeness too. In many places today, the land and its creatures are being stressed non-stop to the point that their own ability to recover is being undermined. We are working some species and the fertility of the land (and waters) to death. This type of enslavement runs counter to the overall guidance we have received about God's will and desires. Although Isaiah 24:4-8 is not about industrial pollution per se, it does clearly describe negative natural consequences that can be avoided by doing good and avoiding harm.

Somewhere along the line, the idea developed that our ultimate future in God has nothing to do with the earth and the rest of creation. This portrait of heaven relies on the assumption that only the human soul and its future really matters. Everything else has no lasting value in this philosophy. A complete reading of scriptures, however, leads to a very different conclusion.

**Romans 8: 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that 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.**

The Apostle Paul highlights God's intention for the salvation of the whole creation. Freedom is not annihilation. As in the beginning humanity is linked with all of creation, so it shall be in the ultimate future with God. The creation will not simply disappear, as some assume and teach. The creation will be set free, as we will, and with us has hope in God. We are to do our best to manifest now what will fully come in time. The creation is waiting for us to reveal ourselves as children of God in the present, and for us to lead toward that coming freedom so eagerly longed for by doing what we can to enhance the life of the rest of creation along with human beings. Colossians 1:15-20 talks about God reconciling all things (not just humanity) through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. One of the ways to encounter and to embrace the Prince of Peace, is to practice the wider embrace of God. Christian Retreats engage people in hopeful action knowing that ultimately the universe is in the hands and heart of God.

### **Excerpts from the Social Principles of the UMC**

The Social Principles are a prayerful and thoughtful effort on the part of the General Conference to speak to the human issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation as historically demonstrated in United Methodist traditions.

#### **THE NATURAL WORLD**

All creation is the Lord's, and we are responsible for the ways we use and abuse it. Water, air, soil, minerals, energy resources, plants, animal life, and space are to be valued and conserved because they are God's creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings. God has granted us stewardship of creation.”<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> *The Works of John Wesley* (on CD ROM) (Providence House Publishers: 238 Seaboard Lane, Franklin, TN 37067), 1995 Volume 1 page 185

<sup>ii</sup> Meister Eckhart (1260-1329) found on the following website - <http://www.holdenvillage.org/news/gc2005winter/barnett.html> page 259 of Meister Eckhart – Teacher and Preacher

<sup>iii</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal* (The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, TN, 1999), Hymn 144

<sup>iv</sup> *The Works of John Wesley* (on CD ROM) (Providence House Publishers: 238 Seaboard Lane, Franklin, TN 37067), 1995 Volume 5 page 283

<sup>v</sup> *The 2004 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church – The Social Principles* (The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, TN, January 2005) ISBN: 0687350646