

Renewing the sacred balance in our spirituality and way of life

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It is one thing to know that God is present in creation. It is another to experience this in our heart, to feel it at the deepest level of our being.

Most of us, at some time, have experienced being in a place so beautiful that we are suddenly overwhelmed with a sense of awe. We are drawn out of ourselves into something much greater. We feel a profound sense of joy, peace and reverence. We are filled with the presence of God.

The more we connect to the presence of the sacred in nature, opening ourselves to the beauty of creation, the stronger our motivation will be to renew the sacred balance. Only a deep, abiding love for God's creation can sustain us in the long term.

Along with reconnecting to the presence of God in creation, we also need to reflect on the ways in which we disrupt the sacred balance and how we can begin to tread more lightly on the Earth.

On a practical level, we need to examine our levels of consumption. If the entire world were to consume as much as North Americans do, we would need at least five planets as fruitful as Earth to sustain us in the long term. We are borrowing from other people, other creatures and from future generations to maintain our lifestyles. This simply cannot continue forever.

We need to find a way to become a more ecologically sustainable community based on the "five R's": **Reverence, Reducing, Repairing, Reusing and Recycling.**

Here are suggestions for building a sacred awareness and a greater ecological awareness, particularly of how our lifestyle impacts the wider Earth community. These activities can be done within local or faith communities:

Reconnect to awe and beauty

- Take walks outdoors in a natural setting. Try to be mindful of the vegetation and wildlife, as well as your own footsteps and breathing. Be aware of the sacred balance that God has created.
- Spend time gardening. Direct, physical contact with soil and plants allow us to experience God in all living things. Cultivate native species of plants

whenever possible.

- Pray or meditate in a natural setting whenever possible. In the Gospels, Jesus almost always prayed outdoors. Buddha obtained enlightenment sitting under a tree. In winter, try bringing some symbols of nature (a rock, a small piece of greenery) into your prayer space.

- Organize group nature walks and hikes, perhaps in the company of a local naturalist. This could be combined with an outdoor retreat for your faith community.

- "Green" your faith community's sanctuary, or your home or work space, with plants or a small fountain with running water.

Cultivate ecological awareness

- Reflect on the activities that genuinely bring you joy and satisfaction in life. How many of these cost money? How many are ecologically destructive? You may well discover that many of the things you most enjoy are very simple activities that require little consumption. Try to do these things more frequently. Focus on activities that give you a sense of the sacred or help you to build relationships with others.

- Make a list of how your actions affect the wider Earth community—both positively and negatively. Think of ways to reduce your negative actions and increase the positive ones.

- Calculate your "ecological footprint": how much productive land and water is needed to produce all the resources you consume and to take in all the waste you make. Look at ways to reduce your ecological footprint both individually and as a faith community. Quizzes to do this calculation are found at: www.lead.org/leadnet/footprint/ and www.mec.ca/coop/communit/meccomm/ecofoot.htm.

- Take David Suzuki's *Nature Challenge* as a way to start changing your lifestyle. (See pages 8-9.) Find a way to celebrate this commitment within your faith community.

ACTION



Group education and action

- Study Scripture as well as books on ecology and theology to deepen your understanding of the connections between your faith and ecology.
- Write articles on ecology and faith for your church bulletin, or develop a space on the bulletin board for ecological issues.
- Work with leaders of your faith community to incorporate ecological themes and music into liturgy, prayer and worship, especially for children. Wherever possible, mark the seasons, using symbols from nature and taking into account the four traditional elements of earth, water, fire and air.
- Plan an ecumenical or interfaith prayer service with other faith groups in your area to celebrate **Earth Day (April 22)**. This year's Earth Day focuses on the theme of water.
- Begin an "Earth Literacy" program, perhaps in cooperation with other faith communities in your area. Earth literacy makes us feel more "at home" in our local biological region by helping us become more knowledgeable about the local plants, animals and ecosystem.
- Find out if your municipality has a committee working on ecological issues. If so, investigate its work as well as possible ways to become involved.
- What are the major ecological issues in your community? Find out what work is being done in schools, residents' associations, and other community groups on these issues. How can you or your faith community get involved?
- Become involved in the clean up and restoration of places of ecological significance in your area such as rivers, marshes, forests and ravines.

Buy less, buy carefully:

- Only buy what you need. To avoid "impulse shopping," make a shopping list before you leave home and stick to it.
- Buy products with less packaging. Shop at bulk stores.
- Avoid buying disposable items—particularly those made of plastic, Styrofoam, and other materials that are non-biodegradable or difficult to recycle.

- Use fabric shopping bags. If you use a plastic bag, reuse it or return it where possible.
- Do not buy or use toxic cleaners. Vinegar and baking soda are excellent cleaners that can be used widely. Buy ecologically friendly cleaners. Look for products with the EcoLogo, certified by Environment Canada's Environmental Choice program as being less ecologically harmful.

Reduce energy use

- When building a new home or religious building, ensure that it meets the R-2000 standards. Consider alternative building methods such as straw bale or compacted earth construction.
- Choose appliances that are Energy Star® approved.
- Do an EnerGuide evaluation of your home or place of worship to identify energy use. Homes are eligible for a grant for reductions in energy use. This program or one similar to it may soon be available for religious buildings.
- Reduce energy use for heating and cooling by using a programmable thermostat. Keep the thermostat at 20°C or lower in winter and at 24°C or above in summer. Put a programmable thermostat on your water heater as well.
- Replace light bulbs with energy efficient alternatives such as compact fluorescents. Turn out lights when not in use. Use motion detector switches in houses of worship to ensure that lights are off in empty rooms.
- Improve your home, church or temple's insulation, seal heat leaks with caulking and install more energy efficient windows.

Lawns and gardens

- Replace chemical pesticides for your lawn, garden and houseplants with non-toxic alternatives. Advocate for a municipal bylaw to ban the use of pesticides on lawns and gardens. Several communities in Quebec have already passed these kinds of bylaws, as has the City of Toronto.
- Consider an alternative garden based on native plants, or a lawn with a high percentage of clover.

Choose varieties of grass that use less water and do not cut lawns too short as this results in a less healthy lawn that is susceptible to weeds.

- Plant trees to help purify the air, attract wildlife and reduce cooling costs in summer. Evergreens planted on the north side of buildings can also reduce heating costs in winter.
- Collect rainwater from eaves troughs for garden use.
- Consider organizing communal garden plots instead of lawn on public property or at your place of worship.

Food

- Reduce the amount of meat you consume. Meat production consumes high amounts of water and grain and also creates significant quantities of waste.
- Whenever possible, purchase locally produced food and support local economies. Food that is transported over thousands of kilometres wastes energy. As well, local food-growers may use more sustainable methods and fewer pesticides.
- Buy organic food whenever possible, even though it may be more expensive. Organic farming methods are gentler on the Earth.
- Consider organizing a local farmers' market in your community.
- Become involved in Community-Supported Agriculture—a group of people who commit to buying the produce of a local farmer and participate in the planning of the crops to be grown.

Transportation

- Transportation is the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in Canada, accounting for a quarter of all emissions. It is also one of the major sources of air pollution.
- Walk, bike or use public transit whenever possible. Use public transit or carpool to work. For long-distance travel, choose a train or bus as often as possible.
 - Choose a home within a 30-minute walk, bike or transit-ride from your daily destinations.

Additional resources & contacts

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE EARTH: The Anglican Diocese of Ottawa has published a practical guide on what churches (and faith communities) can do to renew their relationship with the Earth. Download from ottawa.anglican.ca/docs/renewing.pdf

THE GREEN GUIDE: The David Suzuki Foundation has published a guide to accompany the *Nature Challenge*. (See pages 8-9.) Download from www.davidsuzuki.org/files/WOL/GreenGuide.pdf

ENERGY WORKBOOK FOR RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS: Originally published by The Taskforce on the Churches and Corporate Responsibility, this step-by-step workbook helps congregations assess the energy use of their buildings and plan retrofits to reduce energy use. It is available for \$2.00 through United Church Resource Distribution (Product #: 500000082). Call: (416) 253-5456 or 1-800-288-7365.

RESOURCE LISTINGS—RENEWING THE SACRED BALANCE: This listing of resources related to faith and ecology is available at: www.faith-common-good.net/resources/sacredbalance/index.asp

HARVARD UNIVERSITY FORUM ON RELIGION AND ECOLOGY: Brings religious studies together with academic and activist discourse on the environment: environment.harvard.edu/religion/

CANADIAN FORUM ON RELIGION AND ECOLOGY: Exploring religious worldviews, texts and ethics in order to broaden understanding of the nature of current environmental concerns within the Canadian context: rels.queensu.ca/cfore/

- Check the Canadian Government's Auto Smart ratings for the next car you intend to buy to make sure it is fuel efficient and low polluting. Buy the smallest vehicle that will meet your needs. Consider the possibility of purchasing a gas/electric hybrid. Ensure that your car has regular tune-ups to cut down on emissions and improve gas mileage.
- Investigate car-share programs such as VrtuCar (Ottawa), www.vrtucar.com, and AutoShare (Toronto) www.autoshare.com.
- Advocate for government funding for more public transit and bike paths.
- Advocate for tax incentives that encourage fuel-efficient cars—for example, a tax on fuel-hungry vehicles that would be used to subsidize gas/electric hybrids.