RESPONSIVE *Congregations*

Case Studies from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0

CONGREGATIONS AND CREATION CARE

Two trees—a willow and a pine—on the property of Christ's Community Church in Fishers need to be removed. The willow, situated in a low spot where rainwater pools, is dying. The pine is dead. Cutting them down could be just another chore on the church's to-do list. But with a little imagination, it could be something more.

The church's pastor, Rev. Nate Pyle, recently talked about removing the trees with a member of the church. The member offered an idea: "Could we do an 'arbor day' this fall where we cut them down—then plant some new trees in this area, and have a potluck where we pitch in and celebrate all of that?"

Nate Pyle

For Pyle, that kind of creative thinking sums up "creation care"—as people motivated by faith often call environmentalism—at its best. It builds community, focuses on problem solving, and makes a real difference in the world.

"A couple more willow trees will help suck up some of the water off that low spot," Pyle says. "It improves the church property. It's very local, very tangible. And hopefully, it moves the needle just a little bit."

Christ's Community Church Fishers

Green shoots

Christ's Community Church is not an obvious place for creation care to be a priority.

A Reformed Church of America congregation of about 100 worshippers in the northeast suburbs of Indianapolis, it is "right in the middle" in terms of its members' politics. "We have people who are very conservative, and some who are quite liberal," Pyle says. "As a whole, we're pretty moderate. We try really hard to make space for our differences and allow those differences to be expressed."

The church's embrace of climate care has been driven largely by Pyle's own journey over the past few years. He reconnected with his childhood love of nature during a 2019 sabbatical (made possible by a Lilly Clergy Renewal Grant, offered through the Center for Pastoral Excellence at Christian Theological Seminary). During that time, he took a three-day retreat in a cabin in the woods; visited Italy, where he was able to meet with farmers and vintners whose family connections to the land stretches back generations; and went backpacking deep into Yellowstone National Park with one of his sons.

When he returned to his pastorate full-time, Pyle decided that he wanted his ministry to be about three things: Relationships, culture, and creation. Caring for creation is "a core part of who I am and how I experience God in the world," he says. "And what excites me."

Christ's Community soon connected with Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN), a national organization that educates churches about climate change and organizes political actions to combat it. Christ's Community hosted a luncheon where an EEN representative described its work to leaders of local churches. Together, they brainstormed ideas for taking action.

In April, Christ's Community hosted "Creation Fest" in partnership with other local churches.

COVID delayed the church's "green" initiatives through much of 2020 and 2021, but Christ's Community has strongly re-engaged with creation care in 2022. In March, it had more than 50 solar panels installed on its roof with help from Creation Care Partners, an organization that awards grants to help pay for solar installation. And in April, Christ's Community hosted "Creation Fest" in partnership with other local churches. There were about 15 vendors and information booths on site, devoted to everything from soil conservation and composting to beekeeping and rescue rabbits. The church may make the festival an annual event.

Storm clouds

Initiatives like planting trees, keeping bees, and rescuing rabbits provoke little pushback. Even so, Pyle understands why creation care is a hard sell for many congregations. Discussions of climate change can quickly become political.

"We've got three, maybe four, churches that we've been working with on this stuff, and we've tried to invite other people, but they just aren't interested," he says. "There are so many other divisive conversations happening that they don't even want to touch this.

"That's my sense from pastors: Yes, this is important. Yes, the church should be concerned about it. But I don't have the emotional or mental bandwidth to do it. ...I don't want to inject another polarizing conversation into my congregation."

Yet the dire warnings about the dangers of inaction keep emerging at a steady pace. They come from a wide range of sectors and sources—partisan and nonpartisan, conservative and liberal, public and private.

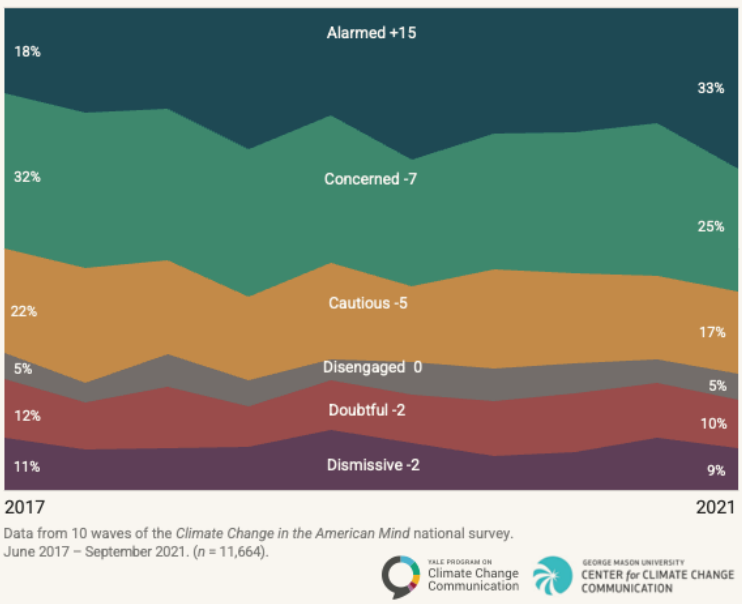
The Washington Post reported in early July that the wildfire season in the West and Southwest is getting longer, and reservoirs are running dry; the East Coast is deluged by heavy downpours; and in the Midwest, the heat is straining the electric grid to the point that rolling power outages are likely. These conditions, the *Post* observed, are "turning what for many Americans is a time of joy into stretches of extreme heat, dangerously polluted air, anxiety, and lost traditions."

In early 2022, the business consulting firm Deloitte issued a report, "Turning Point," which observed that "the need for action has never been clearer. The question before us now is: How do we pivot from awareness to action?" Meanwhile, the military is taking aggressive action. The U.S. Army released its first-ever climate strategy in February. The plan sets a goal of reducing the Army's emissions by half by 2030.

Shifting climate of opinion

These and similar reports and initiatives are having a distinct effect on public opinion. Surveys by the Yale Program on Climate Communication, for example, show that 33 percent of the population was "alarmed" about climate change in 2021, versus only 18 percent in 2017.

Data from the same center show that religious Americans are in harmony with the general population on this issue. Overall, 63 percent of respondents in its 2015 survey agreed that climate change is happening.



The number was slightly higher among Catholics (69 percent) and slightly lower among non-evangelical Protestants (62 percent). Evangelicals showed the most skepticism. Even so, 51 percent said that climate change is happening. A strong majority of all religious groups surveyed supported strict carbon emission limits on coal-fired power plants to fight climate change and improve public health—including 75 percent of Catholics and 60 percent of evangelicals.

Perhaps surprisingly, evangelicals were more likely than any other group to affirm that "God expects people to be good stewards of nature." Thirty-four percent strongly agreed—versus 22 percent for the general population, 27 percent for Catholics, and 21 percent for non-evangelical Protestants.

The complex attitudes of evangelicals on climate change—their strong support for creation care, despite their relative skepticism that climate change is happening or poses an existential threat—is much more than a curiosity. White evangelicals are a key constituency of the Republican Party, and their skepticism has traditionally led the GOP to resist climate-change legislation.

Seeds of change

For activists and organizers, that fact is simultaneously frustrating and potentially a source of hope. For the moment, it has mostly blocked national-level action on climate change. But if evangelicals' concern for creation care can be organized and channeled, it could be key to creating a strong national consensus—and momentum—for addressing climate change.

Elsa Barron

"One thing I really appreciate about evangelical communities is that—when the community is compelled to act—they very much deliver on that, and they can be very powerful forces," says Elsa Barron, an organizer with Faith in Place. "The question is, what directions will those forces take? I very much hope that showing up for our neighbors, showing up for justice and care for creation, will be the future direction for the community."

Faith in Place is an affiliate of the national Interfaith Power and Light (IPL) organization, which began in California in 1998 and now has affiliates in 40 states. The Indiana and Wisconsin chapters of IPL recently joined with the Illinois chapter to create one entity with a regional focus. Faith in Place works with all faith traditions to implement a variety of creation care projects—solar panels, recycling programs, urban gardens, and much more—and partners with about two dozen congregations in Indianapolis.

Barron, a 2021 graduate of the University of Notre Dame, was a fellow with Young Evangelicals for Climate Action during her college years. Before attending the global Glasgow Climate Change Conference last fall, she wrote in an essay for the *Indianapolis Star* that "Indiana presents a ground zero for climate action in many ways." For example, it ranks first among all states in pollution and toxic releases per square mile, and in 2020 it ranked third among states in total coal consumption.

Considering that reality, pushing for change through the Indiana legislature is a high priority for Faith in Place. Last winter, it supported an effort led by high school students to pass a bill in the General Assembly that would have created a climate-change task force. Roughly 80 organizations and nearly 20,000 people signed a petition in support of the bill, which was introduced by Ron Alting, a Republican state senator from Lafayette.

Even so, the bill failed to get a hearing in the legislature. Such setbacks are a familiar and discouraging story for climate-change activists and organizers. Yet their efforts could build the foundation for profound change by bringing people together and building a sense of community around specific demands—which is how profound political transformation often happens in America.

"One of the great things about Indiana is that there's a lot of community among people who are passionate about climate-change issues," Barron says. "Everyone in the community knows that Indiana is a really hard state to do this work in, because there's a lot of skepticism and political investment into making this energy transition difficult. But at the same time, there are amazing communities that are really strongly taking action to do something about it."

Personal and political

One of those communities is Downey Avenue Christian Church, a Disciples of Christ congregation on the city's near-east side. It has roughly 150 to 200 active

DOWNEY AVENUE CHRISTIAN ESTABLISHED ITS GREEN TEAM ABOUT A DECADE AGO. SINCE THEN, IT HAS INSTALLED 36 SOLAR PANEL ON ITS ROOF.

» Solar panels line the roof of Downey Avenue Christian Church in Indianapolis.

members and belongs to the Disciples' Green Chalice program, which recognizes and supports churches that are taking steps to cut their carbon emissions. To participate, a church forms a green team, signs a covenant, and makes three changes that demonstrate their commitment to creation care.

Downey Avenue Christian established its green team about a decade ago. Since then, it has installed 36 solar panel on its roof. One of its most popular and enduring programs involves collecting and recycling prescription medicine bottles. (Nearly 5 billion prescriptions are filled in the U.S. every year. Because they require a special recycling process, most of the bottles likely end up in landfills.)

Downey Avenue also belongs to the Eastside Creation Care Network, which represents about 10 congregations on the near-east side. They meet every-other month to listen to speakers, discuss books and "green" initiatives, and watch films. Then they take what they learn back to their home congregations and share it through programs, newsletters, word-of-mouth, and other channels.

Downey Avenue's creation-care team recently discussed *Saving Us*, a 2021 book by the climate scientist and evangelical Christian Katharine Hayhoe. The *New York Times* described it as "an optimistic view on why collective action is still possible." For Dennis Slaughter—who has led Downey Avenue's creation-care team for about a year—one takeaway is that truly engaging with creation care means becoming actively political.

"We have to deal with institutional and systemic issues, not just our individual actions," says Slaughter. "Our scriptural mandate is a mandate of love and of justice, and those who have the least resilience are already suffering the most."

On the last Sunday before the pandemic ended in-person services in 2020, Downey Avenue's creation-care team distributed fact sheets about climate-related bills in the Indiana General Assembly. It also supplied customized contact information so that each member could easily reach out to their representatives.

Three strategies for success

True to his congregation's "right in the middle" position, Nate Pyle at Christ's Community Church has moved cautiously toward political engagement with the issue. His efforts have consisted mainly in writing and/or signing letters and petitions. He has also agreed to take part in a meeting with one of Indiana's U.S. senators, Mike Braun, that the Evangelical Environmental Network is attempting to organize.

"White suburban evangelical pastors often don't get into the politics side of things," he says. "Pastors that oversee urban or minority congregations typically do more political work and see that as the role of the pastor. But white suburban evangelical pastors tend not to. And I think that's a little bit scary for some folks. It's been a little bit intimidating to me. But I'm starting to think that's what it means to use my influence, if I have any as the pastor of 100 people."

In navigating this terrain over the past few years, Pyle has adopted a few strategies that have helped the church avoid divisions and conflicts.

One is to pay close attention to language and framing. "What I've noticed is that if you talk about environmentalism, people kind of get up in arms and see that as a liberal term," Pyle says. "But I'm also a hunter, so I talk about conservation. Most hunters and fishermen are all on board with conservation—whether it's Ducks Unlimited, which is helping preserve wetlands and duck habitat, or the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, or the National Wild Turkey Foundation.

"There are all these other organizations that are full of sportsmen who have been involved in the conservation of land and biodiversity for years. And they typically tend to be more conservative people. So, sometimes I use the language of conservation over environmentalism, just because it strikes a different chord."

A second strategy is to set a tone and establish priorities—then let others fill in the details and take ownership of the work. Creation care inspires (and demands) action across such a broad of sectors that virtually everyone can find a niche and lend a hand to the cause.

Christ's Community, for example, has a creation care committee that puts out a monthly newsletter with ideas for conservation and other actions to help fight climate change. It oversaw the process of installing the solar panels, and members help maintain a nearby railroad bed that has been transformed into a biking and walking path.

"I'm not necessarily the one pushing these things, so that makes it a lot easier," Pyle says. "It's so beneficial to me to not be the face of it."

A third proven strategy, especially in conservative-leaning congregations, is to focus on immediate and tangible payoffs rather than big-picture, long-term effects—a conversation that can become so abstract and/or scary that people tune it out.

"If you talk about it on the global level, people don't know what to do about it, and it's paralyzing," Pyle says. "But if we can talk about these small, practical things and connect them to people's actual lives and how it can benefit them—that's what I'm trying do as a pastor. To move people's thoughts and behaviors just a little bit."

Anchored in faith

For all that, the big-picture element of creation care is crucial—even if it remains in the background—because the work goes beyond strictly practical or economic calculations. It gets at core values.

People want to contribute because creation care has a deeper meaning. With the era of accelerating climate change bringing that truth into sharp focus, opportunities to contribute have real value. A global survey by the Yale Program on Climate Communication, for example, confirmed that "sustainability" is a top priority among young people interested in business careers. Seventy-eight percent said that "all else equal, they would choose to work for a company with good environmental practices," and 51 percent said they would accept a lower salary to do so.

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>
> — Nate Pyle

One compelling reason to think that congregations could help lead the fight against climate change is that creation care combines some of the things they do best. Namely, it brings people together in community to work out—and live out—their values, usually with an eye on improving the world for future generations.

Dori Chandler, the Indiana statewide outreach director for Faith in Place, observes that in her own Jewish tradition "even the holidays connect you to your environment. They're based on harvests, on rain. When people talk about the weather, it's not just a conversation starter. It's because humanity is desperately connected to—and needs to understand—the elements. So, the Jewish faith value [fundamental to creation care] is that interconnection exists. And the commandments call on us to keep that fact mind and put it into action."

Pyle captured this sense of interconnection—and a more profound dimension—in an essay he wrote for EEN about his 2019 sabbatical. One night in Yellowstone, he recounted, "as I listened to the heavy breathing of my son's sleep, I was reminded of the words I had seen earlier that summer printed on a garbage can in the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi: 'Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children.'

"Our dominion—the watching over and keeping of—exists within creation, as part of creation," Pyle concluded. "And so, caring for the world is not just a mandate given to us, but an opportunity to observe, yet again, God's redemption of all things."

Written by Theodore M. Anderson

Responsive Congregations is a publication of the Project on Religion and Urban Culture 2.0, a joint initiative of the IU School of Liberal Arts and Polis Center, both at IUPUI. RUC 2.0 examines how Indianapolis-area congregations have adapted to rapid social and technological changes since 2000, using findings from an earlier project (RUC 1.0) as a baseline. Both projects have been supported by a grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc. Subscribe to future research highlights here. Read past issues here. For more information, contact polis@iupui.edu.

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