

12 ways Presbyterians are taking environmental action

By Anna Warren | Presbyterians Today

The Book of Genesis begins with the soaring words, “In the beginning, God created” and we read about the land and sea and all the creatures and plants inhabiting the new thing God has made. We then read about the responsibility given to us to care for Creation as Genesis 2:15 says, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.”

The Genesis passages have been a key motivator for Christians seeking to cut down on waste and reverse greenhouse gas emissions to secure a cleaner future for generations to come. However, as we see not much later in Scripture, humankind quickly failed in living up to their God-given responsibility. And while a year of pandemic living, which halted travel plans and curtailed daily commutes, has reduced greenhouse gas emissions in the United States by 10% in 2020, environmentalists say the decline will reverse once COVID-19 safety restrictions begin lifting. The work of “tilling the garden” continues.

Although the world’s ecological problems often feel overwhelming and over-politicized, reclaiming our roles as stewards of Creation does not have to be so. In honor of Earth Day Sunday, which is April 25, *Presbyterians Today* shares 12 ways that Presbyterians are doing their part to “till the garden” and care for Creation.

1. Recycle

Recycling is often one of the first and simplest ways that congregations support Creation care. Many “green teams” begin by setting up bins around the church building and educating children and adult members about recycling. Some Presbyterian congregations go a step further to recycle batteries, cigarette butts and other harder-to-recycle items for the surrounding community. One creative way that First Presbyterian Church of Yorktown, New York, amplified its recycling efforts was to hold a “garbage audit.” The middle school youth went through the building’s trash to see how many recyclable materials members were throwing away, then they created better signage to advertise what could be recycled.

2. Garden



Members of Nashville's Second Presbyterian Church Environmental Stewardship team install a rain garden with the help of the Cumberland River Compact. Courtesy of Second Presbyterian Church

More congregations are seeing their church grounds with an environmental eye — and mission in mind. Second Presbyterian Church of Nashville, Tennessee, for example, established a vegetable garden with the goal of generating sustainable produce for a local nonprofit. Using compost yielded from the congregation's zero-waste meals, a rotating team of volunteers weeds, waters and harvests the

garden. The church recently added a rain garden to reduce runoff and mitigate pollution. The gardens provide a tangible way for Second Presbyterian to love its neighbors, and in the words of the Rev. Nolan Huizenga, "to be faithful stewards of the limited resources we've been given by God." There are also opportunities for churches to create butterfly gardens or plant native flowers in the garden beds to help pollinators. If your community has a gardening club, seek them out to learn more about native plants in your area.

3. Promote environmental stewardship

Many churches celebrate their environmental ministries with special worship services in honor of Earth Day Sunday. These services include Creation-themed sermons, liturgies and hymns. Alison Bennett of Saint Mark Presbyterian Church in North Bethesda, Maryland, says that one thing she loves about her church is that environmental stewardship is included in worship, not only on Earth Day, but any time of the year. Her congregation consistently prays for the future of the planet, and environmental themes regularly appear in sermons. By incorporating earth care into the spiritual life of the

church, these Presbyterians are reminded of creation's immense beauty and our role in caring for it. For worship resources, go to [presbyearthcare .org/devotional-and-worship-aids](http://presbyearthcare.org/devotional-and-worship-aids)

4. Make lifestyle changes

When Saint James Presbyterian Church of Bellingham, Washington, conducted a survey on environmental stewardship, they found that one of the congregation's greatest priorities was to examine which comforts and conveniences they were willing to give up in mind of global needs. The Green Action Team then developed a yearlong program in which they will distribute virtual postcards once per week. Each virtual postcard will include a challenge such as switching from a plastic to bamboo toothbrush, eating more plant-based foods or growing your own vegetables. "Even though we are a smaller congregation," member Glory Johnson said, "we want to stand out in terms of our environmental conscience."

5. Conduct energy audits

Reducing energy consumption is crucial for climate action. After conducting energy audits, many Presbyterian congregations around the country have taken steps to replace light bulbs with LED, improve insulation and upgrade inefficient light fixtures or appliances. These relatively simple actions have led to substantial energy savings, with some congregations reporting saving 75% of their original energy costs.

6. Go solar

To help offset their energy consumption, some churches have made the additional step to install their own solar panels. One of those is Second Presbyterian Church of Little Rock, Arkansas, which was able to install 81 panels atop a covered parking structure on the church property. After the panels were installed, the church held a "Blessing of the Solar Panels," which gained attention from local news outlets and helped convey the congregation's heart for sustainability. Second Presbyterian's commitment to solar power does not stop there, however. Through the PC(USA) ministry Solar Under the Sun, the church joined other supporters to share the power of solar with energy-impooverished communities around the world. Learn more at solarunderthesun.org

7. Engage in local efforts

Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Indialantic, Florida, sits on the shoreline of Indian River Lagoon, one of the most biologically diverse estuaries in North America. However, as the lagoon has been threatened by ongoing water quality issues, Eastminster Presbyterian partnered with a local environmental organization to establish oyster reefs and design educational signs about the restoration efforts. The children and youth have also participated

by cleaning up nearby parks and beaches. According to elder Brooke Wheeler, the work has been an excellent tool for outreach and a means to ensure that the beautiful Florida beaches are there for future generations to enjoy.

8. Host film screenings

To better educate themselves and the surrounding community about environmental issues, many congregations have hosted screenings of documentaries such as “Carbon Nation” or “Paris to Pittsburgh.” Films like “Look and See: A Portrait of Wendell Berry,” “Chasing Coral” (which Presbyterian elder Mark Eakin helped to produce), and even science fiction films like “The Fifth Element” have also provided poignant mediums for discussing environmental issues. With summer just around the corner, planning an outdoor environmental movie night at church would help get a conversation going.

9. Interfaith organizing

Many Presbyterians do not limit their climate actions to the congregation, but also belong to regional chapters of Interfaith Power & Light, a faith-based climate action organization, or other local environmental alliances. University Community Presbyterian Church in Fairbanks, Alaska, for example, was involved in the formation of the Fairbanks Climate Action Coalition. The Rev. Neill McKay says that it began five years ago as a few people around a coffee table and now is a major force of 500 members. The interfaith council includes people from Catholic, Hindu, Indigenous and Protestant traditions. “When you sit in that room, with that much spirit, you know you are doing something right,” McKay said.

10. Advocate at a national level

Bill Bray, a member of The Woodlands Community Presbyterian Church of The Woodlands, Texas, is a passionate advocate for carbon pricing, which is a nonpartisan, market-based strategy for lowering greenhouse gas emissions. With 33 years of experience in the oil industry, Bray believes that a carbon fee and dividend system provides the most promising step to address climate change in a way that appeals to legislators across party aisles. Motivated by the Christian mandate to care for the disadvantaged, Bray and a team of 65 other committed Presbyterians, prior to COVID-19, had been speaking in person at Sunday school classes around the country and asking congregants to reach out to members of Congress. The Rev. Matthias Peterson-Brandt, a fellow supporter of the carbon dividend bill, even worked with church member Carly Evans to call their elected official during a Sunday sermon. “We can manifest God’s love for Creation by extending it to those who have decision-making power,” he said. “It is surprisingly easy to do.”

11. Foster a sense of place

The Rev. Dennis Testerman, a lifelong conservationist and the current moderator of Presbyterians for Earth Care, considers his family farm in North Carolina to be his ultimate source of inspiration. “That farm was the place God first became real to me in a lot of ways,” he said. Of all the work he has done as a public conservationist, global mission co-worker and catalyst for environmental ministries within the PC(USA), his fundamental goal is to help people feel rooted and to develop a sense of place. That may include organizing outdoor experiences for urban children, promoting permanent land protection or simply enjoying the pleasure of a full moon. “Spending time in nature is lifegiving,” he explained. “Rather than debating if climate change is a scientific reality, my mission is to connect people to a place and get them to cherish it.”

12. Find common ground

Although climate change and environmental regulations can be contentious issues, they need not be divisive. Jane Laping, coordinator for Presbyterians for Earth Care, says that a key way to address contentions is to find common ground with people. While advocating for reducing carbon emissions in Houston, she acknowledged that many of the people in her church worked for the oil industry. As with any issue, people with opposing views often have many shared values, which are important to recognize. “Gardening and hiking are connections many people have to the environment,” said Laping, adding, “You can start with a shared love of God’s Creation.” Finding common ground takes time and intentionality and can be a way to build healing relationships with both people and the planet.

Anna Warren is a Presbyterian living in Nashville, Tennessee, where she is involved in a Faithful Climate Action Fellowship with Interfaith Power & Light and Creation Justice Ministries.

Learn More

There are currently 264 churches across the country that have committed to caring for Creation by becoming PC(USA)-certified Earth Care Congregations. These congregations have made efforts to include earth care in worship, church education, facilities management and outreach.

Learn how you and your congregation can get involved in Creation care efforts by visiting Presbyterians for Earth Care at presbyearthcare.org; Creation Justice Ministries at creationjustice.org; Interfaith Power & Light at interfaithpowerandlight.org; and PC(USA) Hunger Program’s Sustainable Living and Earth Care Concerns at pcusa.org/environment