

# »» KEEPING THE GARDEN ««««

## A Faith Response to God's Creation

### »» INTRODUCTION

Most of us are aware our environment is facing serious problems. We hear horror stories on the news all the time: global warming, climate change, species extinction—the list goes on and on!

And yet, how many times do we think of these problems as faith issues? Does the church have anything to say in light of our abuse of the earth?

One look at Genesis clearly answers with an emphatic yes! Genesis comes at the beginning of the Bible not so much because it tells of the beginning of things but because it establishes all the grounding for faith, including who God is, and how we humans are supposed to relate to creation and to God. Genesis is not a scientific description of the world that explains everything rationally, nor a mythological description that previews a reality we will enjoy in another realm. The earth is God's, and creation is a "book" like Genesis that reveals Life and light at the heart of all that has life. That is why we must take care of it. We do not need any reason other than that God is embedded in this treasure that we are to hold and protect. If we believe God made the world, our relationship with God's good gift of creation means ensuring that it continues to function according to God's design.

By affirming God as creator, we affirm that creation should function according to God's intention for it. Genesis gives us some handles with which to discern those intentions for creation. Right from "the beginning" the Bible is a meditation on the mystery of creation, the role of darkness and the interplay of light at its core.

**First**, creation is good. This assessment is not reserved just for humanity. Each step of creation was affirmed by the Creator. It was only when the whole of creation was complete that God pronounced the entire world as "very good."

**Second**, God created the world to be full of life, making every kind of plant and wildlife, blessing all. God has created remarkably diverse plants, animals, and people, and delights in the variety.

**Third**, God has woven humanity into creation with special responsibility. Our ability to name creation suggests a caring, integral relationship with our world. Creation provides for our needs; in return we are to till it and keep it. We are to ensure that the earth continues to bring forth life and provides for human need for generations to come.

To care humbly and properly for the earth, we are to respect the limits under which we have been created. Our covenant with the Creator establishes limits on human behavior, but when our wills

### Preparation Alert »»»

In each session is printed a "Unit Affirmation," which may be used as a thread connecting all the sessions. Before the first session, make a poster with the words of the affirmation, so that all may learn it together.



exceed the limits, we degrade our relationship with others, our relationship with creation, and our relationship with God. We must recognize gaps between our needs and wants. We are to look beyond ourselves to see how our use of resources affects people in other areas of the world, threatens the future of creation, and separates us from God.

**Finally**, we are to live into the message of hope. By responding faithfully to God, we can repair our relationship with creation. Many problems in our environment are the result of many people doing little things. Entering into a sacred relationship with God's creation will mean many people making little changes to their lives.



## EXTENDER SESSION

Extender sessions suggest special activities related to the issue of the unit. They help accommodate the diversity of congregational schedules. Since each unit is undated, youth may study units in their entirety and still participate in special events of the congregation that get scheduled simultaneously with Bible study time. Extender sessions can be used anytime, but the one for this unit best follows **session 4**. Calculate now whether or not you will be using the extender session.



## THE TEACHING PLAN: The parts of the session guide

- » **Faith story.** The session is rooted in this Bible passage.
- » **Faith focus.** This is the story of the passage in a nutshell.
- » **Session goal.** The entire session is built around this goal. What changes—in knowledge, attitude, and/or action—do you desire in your group?

» **Materials needed and advance preparation.** This is what you will need if the session is to go smoothly. You'll feel more at ease if you've taken care of these details before you meet your group.

## » FROM LIFE TO BIBLE TO LIFE

The teaching plan we use is called *life-centered*. However, when we write each session, we always begin with Scripture. We ask, what does this particular passage say, especially to youth? Each session moves from life to Bible to life. So the Bible is really at the center of this way of teaching.

In every session we try to hit upon a tough question that youth might ask. Find out what questions on this issue are important for your group. Feel free to bring your own input and invite your group members to add their own experiences.

## » TEACHING THE SESSION

The five step-by-step movements will carry you from *life to the Bible and back to life*. Each session takes about 45 to 50 minutes. If there is a handout sheet for the session, take note of any complementary activities and stories.

- 1. Focus.** Intended to create a friendly climate within the group and to draw attention to the issue.
- 2. Connect.** Invites youth to express their own life experience about the issue, through talking, drawing, role playing, and other activities. Also uses memory, reason, or imagination to get the group thinking about why they view the issue the way they do.
- 3. Explore the Bible.** What does the Bible say about the issue? With a minimum of lecturing, dig into the faith story and search for answers to questions raised in the first activities. The Insights from Scripture section will help clarify the faith story. Help youth discover how the faith community understands the Bible passage.
- 4. Apply** the faith story. What does the Bible passage mean for contemporary life? This is the "aha!" moment when youth realize the faith story has wisdom for their lives.
- 5. Respond.** Why does the Bible passage matter? What will the group do about the issue in light of what they have learned from their own experiences set alongside the faith story? How can we live the faith story rather than pass it off as a mere intellectual exercise?

## » LOOK AHEAD

Here are reminders for what you need to do for the next session or two.

## » INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

Here is a resource for Explore the Bible. Don't try to use all the material given. Take what you need to lead the session and answer questions your group may have. Let the Insights section inspire you to think and study more about the passage for the session.

## » HANDOUT SHEETS

Occasionally, the writer will provide a handout sheet to complement your session. If you choose to use this, make enough copies for the group in advance of the session. These sheets may include questions, stories, agree/disagree exercises, charts, pictures, and other materials to stimulate thinking and discussion.

Generally, no youth preparation is required unless the session plan calls for you to contact selected group members for specific tasks.



**“God’s Spirit  
is felt brooding  
with boundless  
eternal love over  
all, making every  
lifecell rejoice.”**

John Muir, 1838-1914



»» **SESSION 1**

»» **Materials needed and advance preparation**

- Review instructions for “Environmental Pictionary;” get a timer, and write topics on small pieces of paper (see Focus).
- Chalkboard/chalk or newsprint/marker
- Make or commission a “dirty kitchen video” (see Focus Challenge Option).
- Give copies of “Crammin’ about Creation” (on handout sheet) scripts to two people a few days or a week beforehand, and arrange a quick run-through if possible (see Explore the Bible *Option A*).
- Bibles
- Two sets of Legos or wood blocks (Apply *Option C*)
- Paper, pens/pencils
- Contact local parks, your church camp, or environmental agencies for projects for your group (see Respond *Option B*).
- Make a poster with the words of the unit affirmation (see Respond).



# A MESS IN GOD’S KITCHEN »»

»» **KEY VERSE**

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Gen. 1:31a)

»» **FAITH STORY**

Genesis 1:1–31

»» **FAITH FOCUS**

The story of creation in Genesis 1 is a primer about who God is and how created beings interconnect. Most importantly, it affirms God as creator of the world and all that is in it. God began with chaos and, in time, invited a life-giving order to take shape. We do not need any reason to hold and protect creation other than that God is embedded in this treasure. If we believe God made the world, our relationship with God’s good gift of creation means ensuring that it continues to function according to God’s design.

»» **SESSION GOAL**

Encourage youth to build their care for the environment as a faith response to God the Creator.



## TEACHING PLAN

**1. FOCUS 10-12 minutes**

Play a game of “Environmental Pictionary” to help youth start thinking about environmental problems. Pictionary is a charade game in which players silently draw pictures to help their team guess the password or phrase.

Divide into two teams. The first team selects one member to be the “drawer.” The drawer is given a slip of paper with an environmental concern written on it, and has one minute to draw pictures while the rest of the team tries to guess the environmental topic.

The drawer cannot use letters, numbers, or symbols (e.g., “\$” or “&”). The team must guess the topic *exactly*. The drawer can depict one word at a time, but the team must say the right words together. If time expires, reveal the topic.

Play then moves to the second team. Alternate turns until everyone has had a chance to draw, or 10 minutes are up.

Possible topics for “Environmental Pictionary”:

Extreme weather	Population explosion
Water pollution	Greenhouse effect
Littering	Landfill
Oil spill	Plastics
Smog	Clear-cutting
Extinction	Soil erosion
Rain forest	Radioactive waste
Garbage	Sewage
Recycling	Climate change

## 2. CONNECT 7 minutes

**Ask:**

- *Where do you hear about environmental issues?*
- *What is your response to environmental topics when they come up?*
- *What are the reasons you hear for being concerned about the environment?*
- *Do you think Christians are known for being concerned about the environment?*

Conclude the discussion by saying, *We can hardly monitor the news, look at a magazine, or breathe city air without noticing our environment has problems. We haven't taken good care of the world, and now we're living in the mess we've made!*

Instruct the youth to sit back and close their eyes as you read the following:

*Imagine you are hungry. Your stomach is growling loudly enough to be heard clear across the room. School is out and you're going over to a friend's place. The two of you head into the kitchen for a snack. As you walk in, you notice your feet are sticking to the floor; it reminds you of the floor at a movie theatre. Dirty dishes crusted with dried food are piled high on the counters. The garbage in the corner is spilling onto the floor and you can smell something rotten. Your friend tugs a dish out from one of the piles and uses a sleeve to wipe it off before handing it to you. Your friend pushes the cat litter away from in front of the fridge, opens it up, and pulls out a container of leftovers that look suspiciously green. Your friend turns and starts coming towards you....*

**Ask,** *Are you still hungry? Why or why not?*

**Extra challenge option:** Have one of your group members make a home video of the above scenario, and show it to the group instead of describing it. It could be really fun to make!

## 3. EXPLORE THE BIBLE 10-12 minutes

**Shift** to this activity by saying: Our world is like a huge kitchen that supplies us with food, water, and air to breathe. And yet, we are leaving it a complete mess. According to the Bible, when we dirty the world, we are dirtying something created by God and that God wants us to care for.

» **Option A:** Present the creation story from Genesis 1 by using the dialogue “Crammin’ about Creation” found on the handout sheet for session one. Then discuss the questions listed under *Option B*.

» **Option B:** Ask youth to consider the following questions as they read Genesis 1:1-31 from the Bible. (Write them where everyone can see them.) Select one person to read the words of God, and alternate other readers in the position of narrator, perhaps switching for each “day” of creation.



### ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

Sojourner's blog, Taking climate change seriously





**Holy Creator God, help us be live in tune with the health of your creatures and handiwork, so that we may abide in your eternal salvation and continue to be held in the hollow of your hand.**

**AMEN**

(free translation from an evening prayer in *Die Ernsthafte Christenpflicht* (The Serious Christian Duty), an Amish prayer book (1826 edition).



Questions for both options:

*How long ago does the passage say the world was created?*

(In the beginning! We are not told exactly when.)

*Who is said to have created the world?*

(God. The passage assumes this.)

*What at the heart of God's creation.*

(Light. Light of the "first day" is the source of all life.)

*Why did God create the world? For what purposes?*

- to fill the earth with life (Gen. 1:12, 20, 22, 25, 28)
- to provide for the needs of humanity (Gen. 1:29)
- to provide for the needs of all life (Gen. 1:31)
- to create something that was very good (Gen. 1:31)

Finish by saying something like: *We live in a society that is very interested in details. When we think of the beginning of the world, we want to know how things happened, where they took place, and when. The book of Genesis is less concerned with when, where, and how than questions of who created the world, and why.*

#### **4. APPLY 5-8 minutes**

The Bible firmly states that all things have been created by God. God took chaos and out of it ordered a creation filled with all sorts of life. God chose to make it a certain way—a way that brings forth life, provides for the needs of all creatures, including humans, and is very good.

» **Option A:** When someone invents something or writes something new, they get a trademark, a copyright, or a patent. Using materials you can gather in five minutes or less, create a trademark or copyright for the Creator of the earth. Display (with ID tags) the trademarks somewhere in your church building.

» **Option B:** Distribute paper and a pen/pencil to everyone. Allow three minutes to draw something they have made or write something they did that they felt proud of. When they are finished, exchange the papers with a partner. Have them take 30 seconds or so to explain the writings or drawings. Then instruct everyone to tear up the papers they are holding.

**Ask:** *How did you feel when someone else tore up what you had drawn or written? What happens to the heart of God when we do things that mess up and damage the world?*

» **Option C:** Get into the same teams as for Pictionary. Give each team a set of Legos or wood blocks, and tell them, You have 4 minutes to build the eighth wonder of the world (could be a tower, an invention, a sculpture). Have each group briefly explain their creation, then allow each group to gather around the other group's creation to examine it and tinker with it. After a few moments, give groups free reign to wreck the "wonders" they're looking at.

**Ask:** *How did you feel when someone else wrecked your creation? What happens to the heart of God when we do things that mess up and damage the world?*

#### **5. RESPOND 8-12 minutes**

Help the group identify specific ways they endanger God's creation and ways they help preserve it. Ask these questions.

1. *What specifically threatens the quality of life on our planet?*

2. How are earth, sky, and sea polluted?
3. What motivates humankind to endanger the environment?
4. How do young people participate in the destruction of the world God created?
5. How do they help preserve it?

A few things to list if your group needs jumping off points.

Danger:

- wasting natural resources like water, heat, gasoline, electricity, paper
- using (or overusing) products whose manufacture or use contributes to carbon emissions (cars, various plastics)
- littering
- using more of anything than we need
- confusing wants and desires with needs
- being unaware of or ignoring how what we use affects the environment

Preservation:

- Reusing, mending, fixing
- recycling, including composting and mulching
- walking or biking wherever possible
- buying products with little packaging, or providing your own packaging
- planting trees
- buying products made or grown locally

Then choose one of the following options. Whichever option you choose, close in prayer, thanking God for a good creation. Ask for energy, diligence, and ideas for taking care of it. Or use the prayer in the sidebar, and/or the unit affirmation printed at the side.

» **Option A:** “Paying for Poor Choices.” Help youth pledge to tax themselves five cents each time in the next week when they make use of an item on the list of dangers generated above. (Make a list for everyone to have with them, and decide on a receptacle for the coins.) How expensive is it to be careless with God’s earth? Is there a higher price you are paying beyond the money? Send your “tax money” to an environmental protection group like the New Community Project ([www.newcommunityproject.org](http://www.newcommunityproject.org)).

» **Option B:** Plan a service project to help clean up the environment in your area. (E.g., clean up litter, rehabilitate streams in a park, work on reducing soil erosion areas, etc.) Decide on dates and times.



## UNIT AFFIRMATION

**We care for the earth because:**

**God made it;**

**God owns it;**

**God cares for it;**

**God wills it;**

**God speaks through it;**

**God acts in it.**

Shantilal Bhagat, in “God’s Earth Our Home,” produced by National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.



## INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

We live in a scientific society, concerned with details and mechanisms. When we think of creation, we want to know exactly when things happened, how long they took, and what methods and recipes God used. The story of creation found in Genesis 1 doesn’t answer these questions. It isn’t concerned with specific details as much as answering questions of who, not when; why, not how. It affirms truths about God and creation, and their relationship with each other.

## »» CREATED WITH PURPOSE

Genesis 1 resoundingly affirms God as the creator. God created the earth with purposes in mind, and those purposes were good. The motive for writing the account this way was a concern for cultic order. This account, which could be recited as a litany of worship, incorporates the origin of key religious elements such as the Sabbath and the categorical basis for Jewish dietary regulations.

The role of the human in this well-ordered recital is sort of like that of a priest. Like a priest who passes on tradition, presides over the order of worship, and is the agent of God, so was the human to be a steward of the mysteries of creation, to witness to and act on behalf of the divine Presence. This is where we get our concept of humanity being given a unique function—dominion—in the world.

Of course, it is easy to see how this notion of dominion has gotten bent into unrecognizable shape. At best, humans have seen themselves as “better than” the rest of the world. At worst, creation has been seen as a slave, available to fulfill every whim of humanity.

Yet while humans may have been charged with a unique function in the world, they did not get a unique essence. All life comes from God, who made it out of the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7, 19). And our job is to be *God's* representatives, not our own interests. We are to “control” the land only in the way God, the loving creator, might do. As well, Christ’s model of dominion as servant suggests we are to care for creation so that it sustains all. As Christians, we are called to make sure that we use the earth in keeping with God’s loving intent, not our own will.

In session 3 of this unit, we will encounter another account of creation with a different twist: from Genesis 2. This version gives humans not so much a priestly role in creation, but a servant role. While in Genesis 1 humans are called to “subdue,” or master, creation the charge in Genesis 2 is for humans to “cultivate,” literally, to serve the soil. This places human labor under the *land's* control. Most farmers will probably tell you that’s just how farming feels; to have one’s life run by concern for the land.

But the most common Christian basis of humanity’s relationship to the rest of creation has been neither of these Genesis accounts, but the view of the Apostle Paul, which regards nature as fallen and in need of redemption. There is also the presumption that this earth will pass away and be replaced by a new creation. Such a view makes it easy to take the small leap toward exploitation of the earth’s resources (since it’s all going to end anyway), as well as seeing ourselves as striving to be completely divorced from “baser” nature.

But that’s not God’s original intention, and Paul was not focused on environmental dilemmas, especially the kind we experience today. The two Genesis accounts leave us a different ethos, and a different mandate. Both stories highlight “a sacred order designed by God to sustain life and to which human behavior should be attuned” (from Ted Hiebert’s comments at Creation Summit: Shaping an Anabaptist Theology for Living).

If we believe that God made the world, we do not need any reason to hold and protect creation other than that God is embedded in this treasure.

## »» LOOK AHEAD

For one of next session’s Focus options, you’ll need serving-size boxes of a variety of dry cereals (or make your own servings in plastic bags). Hand out copies of the reader’s theatre to three people so they can practice during the week. Also, locate addresses for writing letters if you would like to use that option in Respond.



**“Let us worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,” says the psalm. What is beauty? Beauty is a sum not reducible to its parts. It is a perception of harmony in variety. What is worship? To worship means not to figure out, not to analyze, not to pin down like a dried butterfly on a grid, but to value. Deeply to value.**

from *Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth*, by William Bryant Logan



# Crammin About Creation

**Characters:** **Fimmy Jallon**—A typical talk-show host.

**Sarah**—Bible scholar (holds a Bible)

*(Sarah starts off-stage, with an empty seat for her at front of room. Phil stands, perhaps using a pen for a microphone.)*

**Fimmy Jallon:** Welcome, everyone, to the newest show about something as old as the earth itself, “Crammin’ About Creation.” I’m your host, Fimmy Jallon!

Today we have a very special guest who is ready to answer questions about the very origins of the world itself! She’s a Bible scholar, and a specialist in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Please give a warm welcome to Sarah McMalachi!  
*(Sarah enters.)*

Welcome, Sarah! *(Make small talk about weather, etc.)* Well, everyone’s dying to hear what you have to say about the very beginnings of the world, Sarah, and see what light the Good Book sheds on the issue. Our first question has stumped scientists for generations. Sarah, maybe you can set us straight: *When* was the universe created?

**SARAH:** Yes, well, I’m terribly sorry to disappoint you, but I can’t say exactly how many years ago or anything like that. The author of the story wasn’t worried about such details, and so the Bible doesn’t give an exact date. It does, however, give us an answer. It’s right here in Genesis 1:1. *(Choose someone from the audience to read the passage.)* I suppose, then, the answer would be, in the beginning. On a Monday, perhaps.

**FJ:** Ah,...yes, “the beginning” just about covers it, doesn’t it? Can’t really argue with that. Let’s move on to our next question. Sarah, *who* created the world?

**SARAH:** Well, if you’d been listening before, the passage that was read said that in the beginning GOD created the heavens and the earth! That pretty much sums it up right there!

**FJ:** Sorry, thanks for refreshing our memories.... On to the next question: *How* was everything created?

**SARAH:** Well, all we know from Genesis 1 is that God said, and it was so. Let’s read it. *(Choose youth to read Genesis 1:2-31, with each person reading one day of creation.)* So, to answer the question we can say that God made the earth with purpose. God began with chaos and unfolded an ordered world, complete with plants, animals, and people. All the Bible tells us is that God told it to happen, and it did.

**FJ:** Well, now, it’s time for the final question for our esteemed scholar. Sarah, *why* was the world created?

**SARAH:** I suppose the first answer is to fill the earth with life. Genesis 1 tells us that God made every kind of plant, swarms of fish and birds, and every kind of animal. Then, of course, God tells them to go and do that...that fruitful and multiply thing.

Second, we read that the earth is to provide for the needs of life—God interconnects plants, animals, and people so that life may continue.

Third, we read that God got to the end of the work, stood back, so to speak, and said, “This is really good!” So God must have wanted to create something...good!

**FJ:** So there you have it, folks, the when, who, how and why of creation. Tune in next time when we’ll have a live interview with an orchardist from Washington who can trace her family tree all the way back to Adam and Eve! Good-bye, everyone, and may the good earth sustain you!

<http://sojo.net/blogs/2014/06/05/taking-climate-change-seriously>

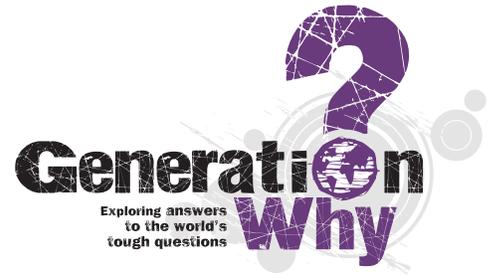


**Holy Creator  
God,**

**help us be live  
in tune with  
the health of  
your creatures  
and handiwork,  
so that we  
may abide in  
your eternal  
salvation and  
continue to  
be held in the  
hollow of your  
hand.**

**AMEN**

(free translation from an evening prayer in *Die Ernsthafte Christenpflicht* (The Serious Christian Duty), an Amish prayer book (1826 edition).



# Unit affirmation

**We care for the earth because:**

**God made it;**

**God owns it;**

**God cares for it;**

**God wills it;**

**God speaks through it;**

**God acts in it.**

Shantilal Bhagat, in "God's Earth Our Home," produced by National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., March 1994

**Note:** For great ideas on individual and group projects that make a difference, check out New Community Project ([www.newcommunityproject.org](http://www.newcommunityproject.org)) and YES magazine online. ([www.yesmagazine.org](http://www.yesmagazine.org))