

Healing our Divide with the Non-Human World: Ecclesiological Trends Within the Wild Church Network

Abstract:

A growing number of new faith communities in North America are emerging as part of the Wild Church Network. These outdoor church expressions seek to re-acquaint, re-cover, and re-member their faith communities as loving participants of the larger community of Creation. This paper explores theological foundations and spiritual practices grounding the ecclesiologies of these communities. This study is based on data gathered from site visits, surveys, and interviews with Wild Church leaders and participants. Implications for faith formation in this era of climate change will be explored.

Faith Formation in the Anthropocene

Climate change is a key, if not the key, issue shaping the quality of life on our planet. In May, our planet reached a record level of over 415 parts per billion (ppb) of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.¹ 350 ppb, which was reached in 1990, is believed to be the threshold for a stable climate. This reality contributes to species extinction, sea level rise that displaces human and non-human creatures, poor air quality which most adversely impacts people of color in urban settings, and a myriad of other ecological disturbances and social justice issues. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby describe action on climate change as a moral responsibility.² In his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis cited the need for “ecological conversion” to reclaim our responsibility of caring for God’s Creation³ and all of its inhabitants.⁴ In these times, Christian discipleship calls for a sustained and integrated response to climate change. Yet, as a whole, Christian communities have remained largely silent or indifferent, continuing to engage in practices that exacerbate these realities rather than address them.

What faith-based teachings need to be emphasized or recovered to engage in the work of addressing this crisis? What pedagogies and practices can nurture a love of the earth that heals our divide with our planet and moves people toward action to care for it? How do we equip people of faith with the resilience necessary to engage in ecological justice for the long haul,

¹ “Daily CO₂,” CO₂-earth, accessed September 15, 2019. <https://www.co2.earth/daily-co2>. The level, as of this writing, is a bit lower (just over 408 ppm), but annual record highs have been steadily increasing.

² Bartholomew and Justin Welby, “Climate Change and Moral Responsibility,” *The New York Times*, accessed September 15, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/20/opinion/climate-change-and-moral-responsibility.html>

³ I have intentionally chosen the term Creation rather than Nature in my own narrative throughout this paper. In my experience, most people are culturally conditioned to think of Nature as wilderness or dedicated green space. This can perpetuate a notion of Nature as “other,” perhaps especially in persons raised in urban settings. Creation, while still conjuring images of the natural world, I believe has greater potential for inviting a broader perspective which would include the grass emerging through a sidewalk crack as well as human beings. I have also intentionally capitalized Creation to communicate its reality as a sentient being and help shift our cultural tendency to refer to Creation as an “it”.

⁴ Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’ of the Holy Father Francis: On Care for our Common Home*. 18 June 2015.

even when the fruits of our labor are uncertain? What spaces do we create for the acknowledgement and processing of grief which is inevitable as we lose habitats, species, and human communities?

Erin Lothes Biviano interviewed faith-based environmentalists and uncovered seven patterns that moved people from being “ideally green” to “really green.”⁵ Biviano states that “promoting experiences in nature is a key strategy for several faith-based environmental groups.”⁶ Concurrent with reading Biviano’s research, I discovered the Wild Church Network (www.wildchurchnetwork.org), a network of churches that worship outside. These communities seek to help people “re-acquaint, re-cover, and re-member”⁷ themselves as participants in the natural world. Through an online survey, interviews with leaders and participants, and site visits to several of these churches in the United States, I sought to discern how, if at all, worshipping outdoors impacted the spiritual lives of participants as well as their sustainability practices. Did regular communal worship outdoors help people move from being “ideally green” to living “really green”? Were there distinctive elements of their spiritual experience that appeared not to be as readily available or nurtured in traditional indoor congregations?

This paper explores some of the explicit and implicit theological foundations and community practices of Wild Churches. In what ways are these practices helping heal participants’ divide with the non-human world? This exploration will conclude with a discussion of possible implications for faith formation in this time of climate change, with attention to practices that may be applicable for predominantly indoor faith communities as well. While most of the communities I studied identify to varying degrees with the Christian tradition, some findings may be applicable and/or translatable to other traditions.

Described below are very broad strokes of themes that emerged during my research. Further reflection and exploration will be needed to fully surface deeper learnings and identify challenges in the practices of Wild Churches.

What Makes a Wild Church a Wild Church?

I had the privilege of visiting seven Wild Churches in the United States for this project.⁸ Several Wild Churches in Canada also exist in Canada, and the number in both countries has been increasing steadily. These churches represent a wide range of denominational affiliations (including none), meet in a variety of settings – some with their own property, some in parks, some at times in parking lots – with great diversity in liturgical practice, and varying degrees of connection to the Christian tradition. So what defines a Wild Church? Leaders of these churches have been exploring this question as the network grows. Although the criteria are still being refined, the following four characteristics have general consensus. The first two criteria describe what make a Wild Church “wild”; the second two identify what make a Wild Church “a church”:

⁵ The seven patterns Biviano identified are: scientific literacy; awareness of global interdependence; commitment to social justice; reverence for creation; interfaith connections; expanding religious visions of God, neighbor, and self; and being independent thinkers. Erin Lothes Biviano, *Inspired Sustainability: Planting Seeds for Action* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 1-37.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷ Home Page, Wild Church Network, accessed August 23, 2019, <https://www.wildchurchnetwork.com>.

⁸ I am deeply grateful to the BTS Center (<https://www.thebtscenter.org>) for the Innovation Incubator grant which funded this project. The stipulations of this grant limited travel to within the United States.

1. **Wild Churches Meet Outside.** Wild Churches regularly meet outdoors, rain or shine, except in extreme weather conditions. They connect directly with the natural world, whether in the woods or a parking lot, as part of their practice.
2. **Nature is Preacher and Co-Congregant.** Wild Churches intentionally develop spiritual practices that deepen understanding of the Beloved Community to include all people and all of Creation.
3. **Wild Churches Meet in Community.** The website states: “Wild Church is about going to your own local version of wilderness, into your own watershed, on purpose, *together*, to practice the presence of God.”⁹ Part of this foundational experience includes acknowledging the indigenous human communities who were the original inhabitants of the land.
4. **Wild Churches are Grounded in the Christ Tradition.**¹⁰ While most Wild Church communities either very explicitly and intentionally identify as Christian or implicitly connect to that tradition through the person of the leader, a few communities identify as interspiritual rather than Christian. There is general consensus, however, with the statement that their purpose “is not to recruit new members into any dogma, creed, or even some new ‘wild church’ religion, but to invite people into a direct, sacred relationship with an untamed God, the land, each other, and creatures who share their home, and into a deeper relationship with their own wild untamed soul.”¹¹

Theological Foundations of Wild Churches

Wild Churches do not share a common denominational tradition. They do, however, share a number of theological perspectives that ground their practices. The following themes are all present to some degree in each of the communities I visited. I believe that these foundations can also help a broader range of faith communities heal their divide with the non-human world.

Creation as a Manifestation of God

Pantheism was a predominant theme in conversations with both leaders and participants in Wild Churches. Many communicated a conviction that God is in all things, including the natural world, and speaks through it. As one leader put it, “Creation is God’s sermon.” Another described the theological foundation for her ministry as “my absolute certainty that the Divine Mystery is present, inherent, and speaking to us in and through the natural world. And moves within the natural world. And can be experienced if we are open to it.” A third named “the reality that God, the Divine, is deeply embedded in all things. Within Creation itself. Within human beings. And in the relationships between us. In the space between us. That all things are sacred. All beings.”

Some leaders who ground this connection in Christian terms described Creation as part of the body of Christ, as part of the incarnation. This connection is seen as integral to helping people connect with Creation. One leader described the theological foundation for her ministry as follows: “I’ve had a growing sense of the importance of the concept of incarnation. And I really think that’s the most central and key theological basis for faith, is the fact that God is

⁹ “What Makes a Wild Church a Church? What Makes a Wild Church Wild?,” Wild Church Network, accessed August 23, 2019. <https://www.wildchurchnetwork.com/about>.

¹⁰ This criterion is currently fostering significant discussion amongst leaders in the Wild Church Network.

¹¹ “What Makes a Wild Church a Church? What Makes a Wild Church Wild?”

incarnate, not just in Jesus, but in us and in all of creation.” Another leader asserted that “Once one understands the natural world as part of the body of Christ, then how—why would we not behave with the same intention to that part of the body of Christ as we do to all the rest of the body of Christ that we’re used to talking about?” A number of participants also echoed this expanded understanding of Christ’s incarnation to include the non-human world.

Creation as Part of the Beloved Community

Wild Churches explicitly include the land on which they worship and all of its creatures as part of the Beloved Community. Many leaders intentionally challenge anthropocentric understandings of Christian theology and practice. This is consistent with one of the patterns that Lothes Biviano found as well – an expanded religious vision of God, self, and neighbor. One of her focus groups named an understanding of human “identity linked with the cosmos, with God and creation, being not ‘*apart from*’ creation, but a part *of* creation.”¹² She noted that “within such expanding religious visions, people, plants, and even rocks are kin. . . . These are elements of an ecological identity: an embodied identity that goes beyond a scientific description of relationship between humanity and creation to focus on people’s self-perception.”¹³ Wild Churches often invite their participants to “re-member” their place in creation. As one leader described it,

...loving our neighbor, knowing our neighbor, and welcoming the, the stranger and anyone who arrives, those are all central to our theology and practice. And, I think, being outdoors, how that has allowed us to deepen our, our theology and practice, seeing our non-human neighbors as neighbors. . . . Knowing where the, you know, where the different terrains are, even within these twelve acres. . . that those are part of, part of neighbors, part of our neighborhood, part of what we care for as well as our human neighbors.

Lothes Biviano points out that this understanding can lead to a broader understanding of social justice. In such an understanding, love of neighbor “remained absolutely central, but its compass widened. Now the earth community belonged to a larger definition of the neighbor, and social justice serves the entire earth community, seeing the ‘earth as the new poor.’”¹⁴ She notes further that participants came to understand that “[N]eighbors in need include plants, animals, and even nonsentient parts of planetary systems.”¹⁵

To foster this re-membering, a number of leaders invite participants to converse with one or more of their non-human neighbors as part of their worship service. Several communities have a time of “wandering” as part of their practice. During this time, participants are given between 10-45 minutes to go for a solo walk in the surrounding area. Typically, participants are sent out with a question or holy text to ponder, to carry with them in search of a conversation partner on the land. They seek a companion amongst the trees, flowers, grasses, and/or animal beings that they encounter. One part of this practice is asking the non-human neighbor for permission to sit with them. This simple instruction communicates the recognition of the agency and value of the potential conversation partner.

Thus, the relationship to the natural world is not unidirectional. In their practices of wandering or reflection, Wild Church participants are invited to listen for the wisdom that a being (or beings) has to teach them. As a couple of leaders described, their intention is to guide

¹² Lothes Biviano, 20.

¹³ Lothes Biviano, 21.

¹⁴ Lothes Biviano, 23.

¹⁵ Lothes Biviano, 33.

people from a place where Creation is something they love to Creation being something people have a relationship with – in other words, to move from Creation being an “other” or object to being a subject. This expanded understanding of neighbor was articulated by a number of participants. One person described their community as a place that “reconnects people with the earth and adapts spiritual traditions to engage land and wildlife as steward, co-creator, and friend.” Another participant stated that being part of the community had “increased my sense of sacredness and connectedness of everything.”

Liturgy is key in nurturing these understandings of connection to nature. The two liturgical churches I visited have adapted their liturgies to include imagery of the surrounding land, thanksgiving for the surrounding watershed, and/or recognition of their non-human neighbors. One offers a time for persons to name the creatures that are praying with them and/or to listen for the hymns that Creation is already singing with them. Several Wild Church communities also include recognition of the indigenous peoples who were the first human inhabitants on the land, recognizing the community’s presence on unceded indigenous territory. Sermons or a “Note from Nature” include recognition of what we can learn from Creation and what God is revealing to us in Creation.

Communities which practice some form of the eucharist include participation of non-human neighbors in the ritual. In one community, the celebrant offers the first piece of bread to the earth as well as the last bit of wine. Dogs are among the attendees in some communities and are offered the communion elements. One participant described the significance of being able to bring his dog, Sadie¹⁶, to worship:

...every service I was able to come and enjoy the service, but then also bring Sadie and then walk for 20-25 minutes with her, but in a way that I felt like, you know, ... “I think Sadie was having a spiritual experience too.” I have no idea. She couldn’t tell me... Blake was also kind enough to give her a piece of communion bread every time... [E]very time we would come to church she would sit very quietly and mostly patiently, because she knew something good was coming.

The first funeral in one of these new communities was for a canine attendee. Both leaders and participants view the inclusion of these four-legged community members as one manifestation of how all Creation is part of the worshiping community.

Even churches that do not have a formal liturgy include prayers, readings, or songs that encourage people to develop a relationship with their non-human kin. Several communities began with some variation of a four-directions prayer, intentionally greeting their surroundings and celebrating the gifts and wisdom that their non-human neighbors provide.

Reimagining Salvation and Discipleship

Traditional Christian terms like “salvation” or “discipleship” were largely absent from participants’ descriptions of their church’s identity. Although these words were not used, themes of transformation and service or mission were present.

Several participants described their congregation as a place of healing – healing for themselves, for the human community, and for the Earth. The theme of healing the land emerged predominantly in congregations with settled spaces. Leaders and participants talked about the healing work of letting native plant life return to land that had been over-forested or used for other human-induced purposes. Healing emerged as a theme in non-settled communities as well. One service I attended in a public space focused on repairing harm. Participants were asked to

¹⁶ The names of all humans and creatures in this paper are pseudonyms.

consider how they might repair harm to the land, and were invited to consider this as a practice that would also help them heal from their own wounds. Lothes Biviano noted a similar pattern in her study participants. She noted that they came to see “life on the planet is part of the self—and so the distinction of caring for ‘nature’ outside of us disappears.”¹⁷ Doctrines were seen as not just concerned with the individual soul, but belief systems that impacted the entire planet. They “came to recognize a ‘bigger God’ whose concerns included the earth.”¹⁸

Providing sanctuary arose as a form of mission in communities with their own land. One participant described the church’s mission as providing “relatively undeveloped land as a refuge for animals, plants, and humans.” The leader of another community echoed this sentiment, describing the mission of her church as one of “holding sanctuary, holding sacred space” in an area undergoing rapid development.

These images of healing and sanctuary demonstrate an understanding of salvation that goes beyond Western Christian individualistic constructions that limit salvation to the relationship between an individual and Christ. Salvation is a communal experience which includes all of Creation.

Priesthood of All Believers

One leader explicitly identified this as a theological grounding for their Wild Church. The pastor embodied this grounding in a “Blessing of the Animals” service I attended. After giving the human participants the opportunity to share life lessons their animals had taught them, this leader invited them to bless their own animals, stating “not just persons with stoles can bless.” While other leaders did not explicitly name the priesthood of all believers as a commitment, practices in each community implicitly communicated this theological foundation to some degree. For example, the chosen worship arrangement for almost all of the Wild Churches was a circle. The few that did not worship in a circle (likely due to size) had participants in a semi-circle. This implicitly communicates the importance of all participants in the worship experience.

Several explicit practices in Wild Churches also decentralized the role of the identified leader and engaged all congregants. One of the more liturgical churches had all participants join in the communion blessing. During the wandering that some congregations practice, people are often invited to bring back a piece of nature that spoke to them (if appropriate) and place it on the altar to share in the building of the altar. The leader of one community described this as having all participants become members of the altar guild. Folks are then invited to share about what spoke to them during their wandering. One faith community intentionally describes this as the “community sermon.”

Worship Without Walls

As illustrated in the examples above, participants consistently talked about the experience of worshiping outside as a means of helping them connect or re-connect with God and Creation. However, people spoke distinctively of the experience of worship without walls or physical boundaries. Participants expressed sentiments such as “walls disconnect from what is real.” One leader stated that “the box of buildings doesn’t help us listen to God.” Participants described the lack of walls as leading to authenticity, to being “a truly safe place [for participants] to be their vulnerable messy selves.” A number of participants described how worship outdoors had helped them move from an intellectual faith to a more embodied experience that involves all of their

¹⁷ Lothes Biviano, 27.

¹⁸ Lothes Biviano, 33.

senses. Worship outdoors in Wild Churches called for incarnational participation of congregants. Wandering is a significant way that this occurs, though members of communities without this practice also described more holistic bodily engagement in worship.

Some participants experienced the lack of walls as a means of facilitating connections with people, especially people with diverse opinions and theologies. Two pastors also named the diversity of theological and political opinions present in their congregations, the challenges of discussing climate change issues explicitly, and simultaneous appreciation for the way their congregation members were still largely able to be in meaningful relationship with one another.

In her research, Lothes Biviano noted the importance of worship in helping transcend differences in people's willingness to engage in conversations about climate change. In her study, Lothes Biviano had noted that "[b]ecause group experiences of worship and celebration inscribed care for creation within ancient traditions, worship smoothed the way to accepting new ideas....Worship has a unifying and communal authority that transcends the divisive taint of politics or wary mistrust of that global-warming science."¹⁹ One of her participants noted that "people strongly resisted being urged to consider the environment if it seemed to be motivated by political leanings....But the shared commitments of faith created a bridge. These shared commitments were highlighted and celebrated in worship."²⁰ In the two communities I referenced above, both of which have permanent property, the shared commitment to caring for the land and its non-human inhabitants constitutes the bridge. The communal experience of worship without walls on that land appears to help build and strengthen that bridge.

From "Ideally Green" to "Really Green"?

One key purpose of my research was to discern the impact that participation in a Wild Church had both on one's spiritual life and on participants' daily practices in relationship to creation and its care.²¹ How do people describe the influence that worshipping in a Wild Church has had on their spiritual life and daily practices? Some themes are named in the previous section. Other noteworthy patterns emerged in the survey data and interviews.

Many participants described themselves as having already been committed to caring for Creation and/or being environmental activists. The largest shift for them was merging these commitments with their spiritual practices. Following are some of their reflections:

- "Wild Church has made my environmentalism less secular, and more sacred."
- "I'm now practicing ecospirituality, not just ecoconservationism."
- "This community has helped me connect my spirituality to my environmentally-conscious lifestyle choices."

Some respondents further stated that community participation has also provided strength for their work on environmental issues. One participant described how her experience in a Wild Church "enhances and reinforces" her sustainability efforts. Another stated: "My new social practice ... is that I now meet with other people in nature with a sacred intent. For others, this may lead them to creation care. For me, it deepens my already existing practices and gives me the spiritual energy to continue."

Several survey questions sought to uncover how participation in a Wild Church increased participants' practice of creation care. A significant majority of participants' responses to these

¹⁹ Lothes Biviano, 128-29.

²⁰ Lothes Biviano, 133.

²¹ The second key purpose of my research was to discern particular leadership approaches and skills that were present in Wild Church pastors. Discussion of those findings is beyond the scope of this paper.

questions indicated a positive correlation between their creation care practices and participation in a Wild Church. For example, one person stated that their church involvement has “caused me to kind of completely rethink how I think about church and how I think about spirituality and how I think about care for the Earth, and what it means to be comfortable blending all of those things.” Survey participants listed changes in eating habits (becoming vegetarian or vegan, or at least eating less meat), driving and/or flying less, composting, reducing use of plastics, etc. since becoming part of their Wild Church. One person stated, “I consider the earth when I spend and when I vote.” Several others stated that their advocacy for the earth had increased, either in conversations with friends, family, and colleagues or in deeper political engagement. Some participants attributed these practices directly to their church affiliation; others saw these changes as part of a wider fabric of influences of which the Wild Church was one.

Despite this uncertainty regarding causality in some persons’ individual responses and interviews, overall trends in the survey responses demonstrated a more direct relationship. For example, one question asked persons to respond to a quote from Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si*: “Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an option or secondary aspect of our Christian experience.” Survey participants were asked to rate their agreement with this statement on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 was not at all and 5 was very much so. Of the 50 survey participants, 48 rated their agreement either as 4 (10 respondents) or 5 (38 respondents). They were then asked to rate the extent to which participation in their faith community had influenced their rating using the same scale. Of the 48 persons noted above, twelve rated the Wild Church’s influence on their response with a 3; thirteen rated this with a 4; and seventeen responded by rating the influence with a 5.

More definitive relationships emerged as participants described changes in their spiritual practices and relationship to the earth as the result of participation in a Wild Church. This was communicated unintentionally in response to one survey question. Respondents were asked to rate changes in their level of participation in ten personal lifestyle practices since becoming part of their Wild Church, such as changing eating habits, transportation patterns, and reducing use of plastics. After participants rated each of these items, a follow-up question asked people to list any additional practices they had undertaken since becoming part of their Wild Church. Twenty-seven persons listed additional practices. Of these practices, only nine listed lifestyle practices such as the ones they had just rated. Eighteen listed practices that would traditionally be described as spiritual (although there was a question specifically related to spiritual practices earlier in the survey). All eighteen responses described some form of what one participant described as “increasing time spent in nature; engaging rituals set in nature” through prayer, poetry, personal wandering, and/or learning the names of non-human inhabitants of their ecosystem. One participant stated that they “practice daily to radically engage the natural world, give thanks, [and] walk the earth with care for all beings.” Another stated that they were “more aware of [the] Holy Spirit in everyday encounters with the natural world.”

Pedagogical Implications for Christian Communities in the Anthropocene

“All who worship on Sunday mornings would do well to ponder how our weekly indoor gatherings can help correct our anthropocentric focus, and whether worship services should be held more frequently outdoors.”²²

Jim Antal, *Climate Church Climate World*

²² Jim Antal, *Climate Church Climate World: How People of Faith Must Work for Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 108-9.

“Of course!” Wild Church leaders and participants would respond to Jim Antal’s somewhat off-the-cuff comment in *Climate Church Climate World*. In this book, Antal makes a compelling case for addressing climate change as the key focus for Christian discipleship in this cultural moment. He offers practical suggestions for re-imagining practices, such as preaching, for this discipleship. The section below brings some of Antal’s insights into conversation with the theological foundations of Wild Churches described above. Possible implications for pedagogy and practice in indoor and outdoor congregations will be suggested.

Cultivating Wonder and Imagination

In his chapter on Prophetic Preaching, Antal identifies two approaches as central to the work preachers must do in preparing people’s hearts for the ongoing work of addressing climate change: cultivating wonder and nurturing imagination. He advocates for a commitment to cultivating wonder by appreciating and contemplating the beautiful gift of God’s creation. Antal suggests that the reading of Mary Oliver’s poetry or Wendell Berry’s essays can be a way to nurture imagination.²³ In this short section of his book, Antal seems to be speaking more to preachers about their own formation than offering strategies for the fostering of wonder and imagination in one’s preaching. He also does not explore the possibility of moving a congregation outside to cultivate wonder and nurture imagination. Wild Churches, however, offer such practices.

Wandering is one practice that both cultivates wonder and nurtures imagination. While this practice may not be practical for weekly worship in many indoor congregations, it could be incorporated into other settings such as Bible studies, retreats, and other community practices. Wandering also need not be limited to settings one traditionally considers “wild.” Even urban settings have trees, birds, insects, and flowers that one can observe and engage in conversation with, and learn from.

Faith communities seeking to learn more about their neighborhoods often participate in a “neighborhood walk” to understand its demographics, explore local businesses, and identify public resources that are present there. Faith communities could do a neighborhood walk seeking to identify their non-human neighbors. What flora and fauna are present? What birds and animals do you see? What evidence do you see of their stress or thriving?

Nurturing Love and Gratitude

Antal noticed two key motivations fueling persons’ activism on behalf of Creation. The first, and most powerful, motivator is love: “love of God; love of nature; love of beauty; love of their children; love of creatures and plants in all their diversity; love of the impossible way in which this planet provides all living things with everything we need to flourish.”²⁴ Antal found that such love, combined with honest reckoning of the ways humanity has threatened the well-being of these loves, provides the courage for people to bear witness.²⁵

Some Wild Churches explicitly live out a call to activism on behalf of creation. Most of the communities that I visited did not, though most, if not all, have participants who would describe themselves as environmental activists. Love of creation, however, is consistently cultivated through prayer, liturgy, and other practices. As one participant stated: “Our aim ... is

²³ Antal, 127.

²⁴ Antal, 144.

²⁵ Antal, 145.

to reconnect with the divine through creation, to feel and understand our connection to the living world, to grieve for our destructive actions and learn to be in deeper conversation with and connection to the wild world we are part of. We can't save what we don't know and love." Wandering practice again emerged as a source of nurturing love, but participants in churches without wandering also communicated a deepening of love of Creation through their worship practices.

Gratitude was the second motivating factor Antal noted in activists. They expressed gratitude for creation and all of the ways in which it nurtures and sustains life, as well as gratitude for many other gifts God has given. Interestingly, gratitude did not emerge as a notable theme in my respondents. As noted above, Wild Church participants more consistently described how church participation helped them re-member their identity as part of Creation. For them, this connection seems to motivate action and care, though further data analysis would be needed to solidly determine this correlation.

Antal asserts that faith communities need to transform familiar liturgies and create new ones to nurture the love and gratitude that will motivate action on behalf of Creation. The theological foundations of Wild Churches earlier can provide guidance for such liturgical renewal. Consider, for example, shifting focus from salvation as an individual event between a human being and Christ to salvation as a communal experience that includes both the human and non-human community. What prayers do we need to stop reciting? Which hymns do we need to stop singing, or at least revise? If shifting from an anthropocentric understanding of Christianity is necessary for the flourishing of our planet, some of our beloved rituals may need to be revised or set aside.

The more liturgical Wild Churches have reworked their traditions' established liturgies to include more creation-based imagery and recognition of the natural world as part of the worshiping community. Below is the blessing of the eucharistic elements from one community, which is recited collectively:

Now gathered at your table, remembering that we are one with you and with all creation, we offer to you from your own Earth these gifts of the land, this bread and wine, and our own bodies – our own living sacrifice.

Pour out your Spirit upon these gifts that they may be the Body and Blood of Christ.

Fill us with your Breath, O God, opening our eyes and renewing us in your love.

Send your Spirit over this land and over the whole Earth, making everything a new creation.

In the fullness of time bring us, with this good Earth and with all your creatures from every people and tribe and faith and language and nation and species, to feast at the banquet prepared from the foundation of the world.²⁶

This revised liturgy names the oneness of the human community with all of Creation, and includes the whole Earth as recipients of the Spirit's blessing and participants in the Divine feast. Such re-imagining is also needed in the rituals of indoor congregations to nurture love of, gratitude for, and connection to God and Creation.

Creation as Teacher

But ask the animals, and they will teach you;

The birds of the air, and they will tell you;

²⁶ From <http://kairosearth.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/CotW-liturgy-Dec-2016.pdf>, accessed September 12, 2019.

*Ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
And the fish of the sea will declare to you.*

Job 12:7-8

Reshaping language and liturgy in indoor congregations is an important movement in shifting people's consciousness to a more inclusive understanding of salvation and discipleship to encompass all of Creation. However, nothing can substitute for experiencing the above-referenced liturgy outside surrounded by the trees, birds, rocks, and woodland creatures. I still can feel the autumn breeze and hear its rustling through the leaves as I shared in that liturgy with the human and non-human community in the New Hampshire woods. The community of creation was visibly present as we shared in the bread and wine together. As much as traditional indoor congregations can seek to foster transformation through their liturgical practice, such transformation is limited if all such practice is conducted inside or with only human congregants. The stories of Wild Church leaders and participants shared during this study testify to the significant role that Creation plays as teacher, facilitator, and guide in participants' lives, in connecting them to the Divine, and in strengthening their relationship to Creation. As one participant stated, "It's a lot harder to ignore what's happening to the environment when you're not separated from it."

Time in nature for all participants of indoor churches is an important vision. However, the reality of implementing it could be complicated for some communities and their parishioners. In urban settings, for example, connecting with Creation, as typically envisioned, could be challenging on a regular basis and would require ingenuity on the part of leaders to facilitate this connection. Some churches may not be in areas where green space is easily accessible. However, parishioners can be invited to notice and begin to appreciate trees or shrubs, even patches of bare ground that house communities of insects and microorganisms that we typically overlook.

Accessibility is another concern. Some persons with physical disabilities may have challenges in accessing and navigating green spaces. Others may be fearful of more wilderness settings, due to lack of experience with it or past trauma. How can communities help people with these challenges develop a meaningful connection to Creation? Indoor spaces can be transformed in ways that incorporate natural elements and include pictures of natural spaces. Worship experiences can include visual elements from Creation. Guided experiences with stones, a plant, or other natural beings can be conducted indoors as well as outside.

Next Steps

This preliminary summary and distillation of insights from my Wild Church research points to the need for experiences which help people deepen understanding of themselves as part of Creation, and rather than beings separate from or above it. This connection is crucial for motivating action toward addressing climate change personally and communally. Faith community practices that foster this connection to the natural world are critical for helping people of faith engage all of Creation as part of the Beloved Community in need of healing and salvation; healing and salvation work in which we are God's partners.

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