

MISSION THEME 2009-2011
LIVING FOR THE EARTH: Choosing Creation Over Empire
“What’s it about?”

Our new mission theme builds on the foundation of the Mission Theme 2007-2009 Challenging Empire: A Call to Community. Many congregations have engaged the materials provided by the United Church to explore the meaning of “empire” for their congregation, their lives and the world. And yet many others have found it challenging just to understand the idea of “empire” as something other than a political empire like the Roman Empire of Jesus’ time. That’s not surprising! “Empire” is a term that attempts to describe a complex experience of systems that dominate and oppress both people and the earth. Those systems can be political, but they can also be economic systems or cultural systems. Even religious faith can serve empire as well as resist empire.

In this new mission theme we are exploring how our Christian faith calls us to live in relationship with the earth such that we choose life for our planet rather than choosing life for empire. The following is excerpted from the article “Cracks in Cement” by Mark Hathaway from the **Mandate May 2009 Special Edition**. Pick up your copy today and read the whole article!

“We know that our planet is suffering from its worst fever in millions of years and that climate change threatens the integrity and beauty of the entire web of life.

We know that, if everyone were to live like the average Canadian, we would need at least another four planets to sustain our lifestyle in the long term.

Ecocide – the wholesale destruction of ecosystems and the living creatures they sustain—is the greatest ethical challenge of our day. We can also understand it as a spiritual crisis. In the words of 14th century mystic Meister Eckhart, “Every creature is a book about God.” We are desecrating the sacred revelation of the Creator as surely as if we were burning our holy scriptures.

Each of us participates in this destruction through our actions and by our inaction.

The reality we face can be so frightening to acknowledge that we are paralyzed rather than moved to act. The scale of destruction and the extent of suffering it represents can move us to denial (it can’t really be that bad), addiction (let’s not think about it—we’ll watch some TV or go shopping instead), or despair (there’s nothing we can do, so why bother?)

Empire seeks to reinforce the powerlessness that denial, addiction, and despair engender. We need an alternative vision that inspires us to creative action in defense of all life. We need to believe that another world is possible.

The vision of God’s reign that empowers and transforms all is already present and active among us. We do not need to create it so much as become attentive to its action, invoking it and harmonizing ourselves with its liberating grace.

The gospels speak of Jesus praying outdoors. Could it be that he reconnected with God by immersing himself in the beauty of creation? At the same time, he was rooted in a community of disciples with whom he worked and shared wisdom.

Similarly, we can find the inspiration and energy to move from empire to sustainable community by rooting ourselves in the beauty of creation and fostering communities of spirit, vision, and action. Community provides a space where we can work through the despair and delusion that disempower us, while acknowledging the pain of living in a broken world.

Indeed, in this pain we also experience the truth that we are intimately connected to one another, the greater community of all life, and the Creator who sustains all. In compassion, we also reconnect with that mysterious reality that Jesus proclaimed—that which enables us to stand up and say “we can” against all odds and move to a new way of being as an authentic earth community.

MISSION THEME 2009-2011

LIVING FOR THE EARTH: Choosing Creation Over Empire “What can I do: a new way to eat right!”

The May 2009 Mandate Special Edition features excellent articles on “the 100 Mile Diet”, “Good Food Boxes” and community gardens. These practices reap rewards for farmers, consumers and communities. To delve a little deeper into food issues and our mission theme check out the resources listed below. You can find these at your local library. And why not get your **church or community book club** reading one of these:

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle by Barbara Kingsolver

For those who have read one of Barbara Kingsolver's novels, this engaging author doesn't disappoint. This book follows Barbara's family as they return to a small family farm in the Carolinas and live out their decision to try to produce as much of their own food as they can for one year. The rest they will purchase from local producers ONLY. Each family member chooses only one exception, like coffee! While Barbara writes the main narrative, which is very readable, along the way other family members chip in with sidebars and recipes. Below is an excerpt by Steven Hopp, Barbara's husband.

The Global Equation

By purchasing local vegetables instead of South American ones, for example, aren't we hurting farmers in developing countries? If you're picturing Farmer Juan and his family gratefully wiping sweat from their brows when you buy that Ecuadoran banana, picture this instead: the CEO of Dole Inc. in his air-conditioned office in Westland Village, CA. He's worth \$1.4 billion; Juan gets about \$6 a day. Much money is made in the global reshuffling of food, but the main beneficiaries are processors, brokers, shippers, supermarkets and oil companies.

Developed nations promote domestic overproduction of commodity crops that are sold on the international market at well below market price, undermining the fragile economies of developing countries. Often this has the effect of driving small farmers into urban areas for jobs, decreasing the agricultural output of a country, and forcing the population to purchase those same commodities from abroad. Those who do stay in farm work are likely to end up not as farm owners, but as labor on plantations owned by multinationals. They may find themselves working in direct conflict with local subsistence. Thus, when Americans buy soy products from Brazil

we're likely supporting an international company that has burned countless acres of Amazon rain forest to grow soy for export, destroying indigenous populations. Global trade deals negotiated by the world Trade Organization and World Bank allow corporations to shop for food from countries with the poorest environmental safety and labor conditions. ...

Most people no longer believe that buying sneakers made in Asian sweatshops is a kindness to those child laborers. Farming is similar. In every country on earth, the most human scenario for farmers is likely to be feeding those who live nearby. For more information visit: www.viacampesina.org.

The End of Food by Paul Roberts

This book will forever change the way you think about food while making you very aware of the struggles and the hope for global food security. While detailed, it is very readable and even engrossing. At the end you may find yourself asking: are we returning to blessing the loaves and fishes? Read this amazing book and find out:

Until late in the twentieth century, the modern food system was celebrated as a monument to humanity's greatest triumph. We were producing more food—more grain, more meat, more fruits and vegetables—than ever before, more cheaply than ever before, and with a degree of variety, safety, quality and convenience that preceding generations would have found bewildering... Today it's becoming ever more obvious that our triumph was never complete. The same supply chains that undergird our global supermarket, making fresh produce and meat available in every hemisphere and every season, have also created perfect opportunities for both familiar food borne pathogens... as well as emerging varieties, such as avian flu, a rapidly mutating virus that may well be the basis of the next global pandemic... The very meaning of food is being transformed: food cultures that once treated cooking and eating as central elements in maintaining social structure and tradition are slowly being usurped by global food culture.

For more information on related food issues go to:
<http://www.united-church.ca/economic/food>

MISSION THEME 2009-2011
LIVING FOR THE EARTH: Choosing Creation Over Empire
“What can I do: getting engaged!”

“By making small changes like buying better light bulbs or low-flow showerheads, we are reducing our impact by maybe three to five percent. Armed with the illusion that we’re doing our part, we stop there.” Lisa Van de Ven in *The United Church Observer*, Nov. 2009

In her excellent article “When Green Isn’t Green Enough” Lisa Van de Ven challenges us with the observation that it is very tempting to make a few small changes in our homes or lives and think that we’ve done our part to reduce green house gases and save the planet! And while every little bit does help, Van de Ven insists that to really live for the earth, as our mission theme puts it, all of us need to “keep moving up the ladder of engagement.” And we may well ask: What does that mean?

Van de Ven suggests several responses:

Working together. Our previous mission theme taught us that challenging empire is a call to community. Likewise, living for the earth requires coming together as a community to further goals of greening our homes, our churches, and our communities. St. John’s United in Stratford, Ontario had 17 people participate in an 8 week study called “Experiencing Ecological Christianity” written by United Church minister Bruce Sanguin (available through UCRD). When the course was over, the group decided to stay together to bring ecological education and action ideas to the rest of the congregation and the wider community. Bayfield United in Bayfield, Ontario is home to a local branch of KAIROS (www.kairos.ca). A team of dedicated volunteers is available to lead a worship service that brings to life the KAIROS Energize campaign and helps describe the crisis of oil subsidies and oil extraction practices.

Simplify Life. “Simple living isn’t about spurning convenience; it’s more about choosing when and where to make convenience a priority. For me, dishwashers and cell phones are important; outsourcing lawn care or living on take-out food doesn’t work for me.” Anne Basye in “Sustaining Simplicity: A Journal”. We all live in a particular context. As rural people we cannot hop on a bus to go where we need to go! Cars are a necessary convenience

for some. But a clothes dryer may not be with a big sunny, windy back yard for most of the year! Perhaps the easiest first step to simplifying life is to ask ourselves this question: Is this necessary? And when the answer is “no”, then as often as is possible decide not to acquire it, use it or do it. Remember, simplifying life also means focusing on what really matters. Lots of the best things in life are free. And everything is a gift of God. Perhaps keep a journal of your own experiences around deciding to simplify life.

Consume Less. If you’ve ever tried participating in “Buy Nothing Day” then you already know how hard it is to go for even one day without consuming. It is no wonder when we are constantly invited to think of ourselves as “consumers” rather than “human beings.” The Gospel, however, invites us to think of ourselves as part of the astonishing web of creation. Part of what is required of us as faithful creatures of God is to rethink our relationship to the rest of creation. The earth is not a store house of goods and a garbage dump for our use. It is a miraculous ecosystem. We are a powerful agent of destructive change within that ecosystem and our overconsumption is rampant. Our mission theme invites us to a new sense of responsibility and joyful life less burdened by over consuming. Check out this website for a journey into responsible consuming. www.storyofstuff.com Or this one on observing a buy nothing day or buy nothing Christmas! <https://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/bnd>

We’re in partnership!

Many of the ecumenical and global partners of the United Church are also focusing on issues related to Empire. The North American Working Group for Covenanting for Justice/Accra Confession is part of CANAAC and so is the United Church. Visit the CANAAC website to take advantage of the wonderful curriculum “**Globalization We Can Grasp**”. The website will allow you to download pdfs and view videos on-line.

<http://www.canaac.org/resources/accra-confession/>. The curriculum has five modules: Introduction to Globalization and the Churches’ Response, Global Climate Change: Renewing the Sacred Balance, Farm workers, Low Wage Jobs, and Living into a New Economy, Environmental Justice and Human Rights and Faithful Purchasing and the Global Sweatshop Economy.

MISSION THEME 2009-2011

LIVING FOR THE EARTH: Choosing Creation Over Empire “What is this Empire you’re talking about?”

“Challenging Empire: A Call to Community” was our United Church Mission Theme from 2007-2009. It provided the background for our current Mission Theme of “Living for the Earth: Choosing Creation Over Empire.” Both of these studies begin with the belief that all of us live in the midst of empire and empires. We are called upon as Christians to learn to recognize empire and our participation in it. Likewise we are called upon to resist empire, to struggle against the impacts of empire on the vulnerable of the earth. It is important to have some basic understanding of where the word “empire” comes from and why we are using it.

“United Church global partners in Canada and overseas continually tell us about rising rates of poverty, infant mortality, disease, and other chronic social problems. They decry the wanton exploitation of their natural resources, militarization of their societies, and destruction of their natural environments. Their testimonies give voice to the lived experience of millions of people the world over who feel the developed world cares little for their well-being.

“At its General Assembly in 2004, The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) looked at the negative consequences of economic globalization for the most vulnerable and for the earth community. They encouraged a rediscovery of the **Biblical teaching about empire.**

“Similarly, the World Council of Churches (WCC) has called the worldwide church to commit itself to reflection of the question of power and empire from a biblical perspective. “

Empire is a complex idea and there is no simple definition. In the May 2007 issue of Mandate, however, this definition is offered:

“Empire is a metaphor for interconnected systems of domination that affect all levels of human relationships and in which all people participate in some way. Empire-like behavior can be found in:

- Relations between states
- International trade agreements
- Forms of institutional governance, including within the church
- Interpersonal relationships, including families

The common thread is the unjust use of power by some resulting in the disempowerment, abuse or destruction of others.

As Christians we reject the unjust use of power characterized by empire and we work to build alternatives to empire that are characterized by the values of God’s Reign. Our current Mission Theme, Living for the Earth: Choosing Creation Over Empire calls on us to widen our circle of concern. We are not only concerned about how power is used unjustly by human beings against other human beings. We are also concerned about how we dominate and abuse other species and the earth itself.

Did you know? That you can purchase a five-piece “Challenging Empire” kit through UCRD or Presbytery Resource Centre that has resources for every age group in your congregation? It’s great place to start exploring the idea of empire!

•