

**Earth Stewardship and the *Missio Dei*:  
Participating in the Care and Redemption of All God Has Made**

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The Living Water Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) passed a resolution at its 2014 assembly recognizing “creation care as integral to each faith practice, lived out in worship, service, study, and witness as a vital component of the church’s identity and vocation today.” Given the synod’s expressed emphasis on creation care, my research asked:

How missional are current creation care perceptions and practices among church leaders in the synod? *That is*, how do leaders perceive and practice creation care in daily life and in congregations, and what is the missional character of their perceptions and practices?

To address this main question, my explanatory sequential mixed methods research project surveyed clergy and lay leaders and conducted focus group interviews in the synod. A total of 136 participants, representing eighty-four congregations, responded to the questionnaire, and thirteen interviewees from four congregations participated in the focus groups. I evaluated their earthkeeping practices and perceptions using eight conceptual lenses: sustainability, globalization, global civil society, nature as an active subject in scripture and liturgy, biblical stewardship as participating in God’s mission, perichoresis as modeling reciprocal relationships with nature, eschatological themes of redemption and reformation, and sacramental imagination.

Results revealed several general conclusions:

(1) *Leaders in the Living Water Synod are concerned about several challenges facing the earth*, especially climate change, water issues, and energy issues. They overwhelmingly agreed that global warming is real, that it is accelerating through human activity, that scientific evidence convincingly shows the current use of earth’s resources is unsustainable, that science will not find a solution to global warming enabling us to continue our current way of life, and that the U.S. should cut carbon emissions unilaterally for the sake of the global community.

(2) *The synod exhibits awareness of and openness to biblical and theological connections to earth stewardship*. While leaders did not think knowledge of the resolution was widespread in their congregations, and creation care education for adults was not prioritized, their association of creation care with the teachings of the bible and the Lutheran church was very strong. So was their recognition of creation care in prayers and hymns, and their openness to further learning.

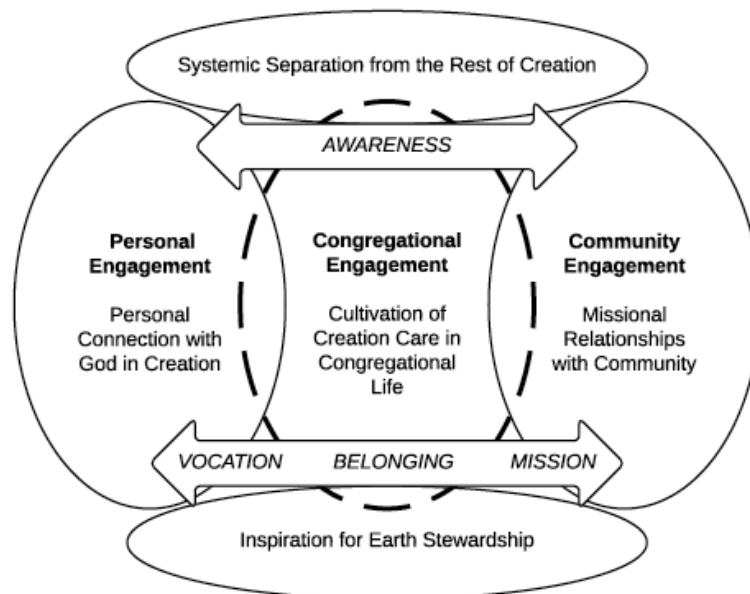
(3) *Political preference is a major factor relative to creation care perceptions*. The

statistically significant differences this study found between perceptions about creation care of those who identified as Democrat or Democratic-leaning and those who identified as Republican or Republican-leaning reflected larger national studies. While survey respondents tended not to agree that bringing up creation care would be too divisive, interviewees mentioned how politically charged it can be and the challenge that presents to leaders in congregations.

(4) *Congregational creation care practices are less pronounced than personal practices.*

The survey showed that individuals were more likely than congregations to engage in intentional behaviors that reduced their ecological footprints, and interviews revealed that even in congregations without a creation care team, individuals could be quite active environmentally. The higher level of personal involvement is both an encouragement to introduce or expand creation care practices in congregational life, and a resource for creative innovation.

(5) *Integrating congregations demonstrate greater capacity to exhibit the missional character of creation care than do those without creation care teams.* More than nine out of ten survey respondents agreed that congregations are ideal settings in which to practice creation care. Yet, the interviews showed that *integrating congregations* (those with creation care teams) were able to deepen and broaden *personal* participation with creation care through *congregational engagement* and *community engagement*, even when there were risks.



The figure shows qualitative themes in integrating congregations. Through cultivating awareness, belonging, and vocation, these congregations built new relationships and grew in understanding their local earth stewardship as a component of participating in God’s mission.