




Sprout

Ecotheology: On Earth as it is in Heaven

A group of people, including women and children, are walking along a gravel path in a forest. The path is lined with trees and foliage, and the scene is brightly lit by sunlight. The people are dressed in casual outdoor attire, including jackets and scarves.

**Called to Embrace
a New Way**

PG. 4

**Providing a Place
for Pollinators in
Toronto**

PG. 10

**How am I Going to
Take Care of the
World?**

PG. 14

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Love Poured Out Prayer

- Wendy Janzen

Lord God, Creator of heaven and earth:
We give you thanks and praise
for the wonders of creation.
You are robed in splendor,
like maples in autumn.
You have made your home among us
and filled the earth with goodness.
In you we live, and move,
and have our being.
Yet, we hear creation groaning,
broken and bruised by our sinful ways.
Forgive us, and restore shalom
among us and all creatures of creation.
Thank you for your love poured out
upon the whole universe.
Amen.



Sprout

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All other photos: unsplash.com

Thank you to all who shared their stories, offering encouragement and learning across the MCEC community of faith.

Front Cover:

Montreal Mennonite Fellowship set aside time for a retreat focused on ecotheology - how am I going to take care of the world?

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Called to Embrace a New Way

“**B**etween Clifford and Mildmay in Ontario is a 100-acre farm nestled into the countryside. This time of year, the trees are bursting with their bright fall colours of red, yellow and orange. Here you will find Andre Wiederkehr, his parents and his brother hard at work and farming in a way that may surprise many people.

“The most basic commandment is to love God with all your heart and soul and mind, and to love your neighbour as yourself. I think of the term ‘neighbour’ very broadly, not just human neighbours but also all the other living things around us and those who will come after us,” says Andre. “We’ve built our whole society on wrong assumptions in a lot of ways. I don’t think that the current system in which we

To be loving is to reimagine those life supporting systems we are surrounded with.

as a society function can last. To be loving is to reimagine those life supporting systems we are surrounded with and try to find ways and systems that are healthy and loving in the long term.”

He and his family are shifting away from an export-oriented small farm to thinking about how they can meet not just their own food needs, but all of their needs from the land they live on. Through this shift, it is becoming clear that they own more land than they need for themselves, and they would like others to join them.

These changes come as a result of deep re-evaluation of practices and ideas they once took for granted, a difficult and disorienting process.

There is a hum across the farm as Andre works in new (or old) ways toward a sustainable way of life. The Wiederkehrs are moving away from tractor-powered farming toward producing food in large gardens using human power. The firewood they once cut by chainsaw

they now cut with a handsaw or axe. They increasingly cook on wood or solar stoves. They are learning about processing flax into cloth and exploring how to build in sustainable ways. These changes come as a result of deep re-evaluation of practices and ideas they once took for granted, a difficult and disorienting process.

Andre does not choose this lifestyle because it naturally appeals to him or fits his interests. “I don’t particularly enjoy a lot of the work for the sake of the work. It can be quite a slog,” he says. “Being out in the field dragging a

Environmental responsibility is a core understanding of faith.

Left Photo:
Andre and Theo Wiederkehr
threshing rye using bike power

Bottom Photo:
Andre turning fibre flax as part
of the retting process





Miles cutting firewood for heat and cooking fuel;
Andre butchering a duck.



Theo and Andre threshing grain amaranth



Miles and Andre harrowing winter rye

harrow around trying to plant small grains by hand or sitting on the bike-powered thresher for hours - those things are not things that I particularly enjoy doing. However, I think its part of a larger vision of what I feel we all need to do. I need to share what I'm doing and have it spread to others."

Theology should be done in community. It's important for me to be connected to the church, especially as I've been undergoing these changes in perspective.

Andre has also focused on transportation over the past number of years. He gave up his driver's license two years ago and has not been in a car for over a year. His family attends Hanover Mennonite Church, which is 23 kilometers from their home. He says, "That's not very far when you use a car but when I bike that distance it feels a lot less close than it used to!"

In fact, at the last MCEC Annual Church Gathering in April, Andre pedaled from his home to Ancaster to participate. "I think theology should be done in community," he says. "It's important for me to be connected to the church, especially as I've been undergoing these changes in perspective." Attending Annual Church Gathering connected Andre with MCEC and he was able to hear what people are talking and thinking about.

The Gospel story is an embodied one. It's about incarnation - God coming and living with us," concludes Andre. "I think it's important to be thinking of our faith as an embodied faith. We are not just spiritual beings with physical bodies for now, but we are physical creatures. Environmental responsibility is a core understanding of faith. We are called to be people - creatures who do simple work in partnership with the rest of creation."

God's Reconciling Ministry for all Creation

Our shared home, planet Earth, is a miracle. I've known this intuitively since I was a child, growing up under the expansive skies of the Saskatchewan prairies. Stunning sunsets, stars, aurora borealis, long winter nights and long summer days with brilliantly clear skies, thunderstorms rolling in from a distance – all of this was a source of awe and a confirmation of the Psalmist's words: *the heavens are telling the glory of God!* (Ps 19:1).

Similarly, the soil was alive and fertile, providing us with both garden produce and field crops. The broad North and South Saskatchewan Rivers defined the landscape and were a place of retreat for canoeing, fishing, swimming and wading. Campfires sparked our imaginations as stories and s'mores were shared in their warmth and light.



Wendy Janzen
MCEC Eco-Minister

All the elements — air, earth, water and fire — nourished and shaped me and my life. I experienced these basic building blocks of life as miracles, as windows into God's immanent presence and provision (and often reminders that I'm not in control!). As an adult my love for and connection with creation has deepened, and it has taught me many lessons about faith and life.

It is time to consider how God's shalom extends to all creation.

Mennonite Church Eastern Canada has a new Identity Statement that grew out of our Creative Imagination process. It names three common purposes, the third of which is to "Embody God's reconciling ministry for all creation." For long enough now, we have read scripture as if God only cared about us as humans. It is time to consider how God's shalom extends to all creation, and to seek God's will on earth as it is in heaven.

We live in a time of multiple environmental crises. As North Americans, many of us have extracted, exploited, consumed and discarded without much real thought about the consequences to the land, water and air, let alone our

plant and animal neighbours in the community of creation. We are being called as people of faith to listen to the cries of the Earth and to respond accordingly.

Eco-theology, eco-ministry, eco-mission — these are all terms that are relatively new, though threads can be traced throughout Christian history. The "eco" prefix comes from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning household, and reflects an ecological sense that we are all interconnected. They are all ways people of faith are responding to the brokenness and injustices in our world. They are a commitment to shalom for all creation, not only to humans.

This issue of Sprout offers a picture of some of the ways that eco-ministry is already happening across MCEC: churches planting pollinator gardens or getting to know the fish in their watershed; global partners modeling sustainability; an individual committed to regenerative agriculture and reducing their reliance on fossil fuels; sharing resources; groups taking worship outdoors and learning to read the Bible through an ecological lens.

In our age of ecological crises, may we be compelled by the love of Christ, firstborn of all creation, to respond with love in action.



MCEC Sustainability Working Group

Are you interested in encouraging people of hope, vision and transformation to live out our faith in ways that have an impact on the world? Are you excited about conversations around sustainability and faith? Do you want to help put faith into action?

Contact Wendy Janzen at wjanzen@mcec.ca for more information about joining the group that has recently started in the central Ontario area whose primary interest is the sustainability of our environment.

Contact John Reimer at jreimer@mcec.ca if you are interested in starting a working group in another geographical area of MCEC.

Resources

from **CommonWord**
Bookstore and Resource Centre



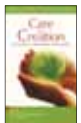
Resources created by Wendy Janzen



Ecotheology:
A Christian Conversation



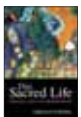
The Season of Creation:
A Preaching Commentary



Care for Creation:
A Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth



Every Creature Singing:
Embracing the Good News for Planet Earth



This Sacred Life:
Humanity's Place in a Wounded World



Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for
Hope and Healing in an Divided World



Watershed Discipleship:
Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice



Church of the Wild:
How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred

www.commonword.ca





Providing A Place for Pollinators in Toronto

“I feel like God has entrusted us to take care of creation,” says Sandy Yuen, member of Toronto Chinese Mennonite Church. “Many people care about the environment and these gardens are a way to build relationships with our neighbours.”

Toronto Chinese Mennonite Church looked at their property to dream of how they could recreate the space

around their church.

Pollinators are in decline because of loss of habitat, pesticides, climate change and various other reasons. With the assistance of the PollinateTO grant from the City of Toronto, Sandy and Ginetta Peters, a local Toronto Beaches resident, collaborated to make a plan for a pollinator garden. They cleaned up the existing garden and purchased

I feel like God has entrusted us to take care of creation.

soil to create the beds. The David Suzuki Foundation and Project Swallowtail donated many of the pollinator friendly plants.

"Because we were doing this during Covid, we were limited in how many people could be together, even outside," said Sandy. Over two days of planting, people in the congregation signed up in one-hour time slots. As one family finished, the next would arrive.

Due to social restrictions, TCMC needed to be creative in their educational activities. "We were still in pretty heavy lockdown mode," recalls Sandy. "We planned a screening of the *Flight of the Butterflies*." After sending out invitations on social media and to friends and families, over 100 households attended the online screening. SK Films kindly allowed them to air the documentary in both Mandarin and English languages free of charge.

Toronto Chinese Mennonite Church also has a community garden on their property for neighbours and community groups.

"Because we are in Toronto many people don't have access to garden space and fresh produce as readily as those outside the city," says Sandy. "It has been a great way to engage

with our neighbours."

It's good to get our hands dirty and really experience God's providence.

Each spring they hold a giant planting day where everyone comes to plant together in a family-friendly event. "It's good to get our hands dirty and really experience God's providence," says Sandy. "God provides food for us and this is a very tangible way to see that. It's satisfying to plant it, care for it and harvest it. It really connects you with the earth and makes you think about where your food comes from."

As the pollinator garden is planted and the vegetable gardens are well established, TCMC continues to maintain them as a community, providing places for pollinators to thrive and work as well as providing food and community to those around them.

Photo Right: Planting Day at Toronto Chinese Mennonite Church - providing food security for neighbours.



Eight ways to attract pollinators

1. Include a diversity of woody and soft-stemmed native plants
2. Leave natural debris like dead stems and dry leaves
3. Avoid lawn and garden chemicals
4. Use a rake instead of a leaf blower
5. Reduce nighttime outdoor lighting
6. Learn bee likes
7. Attract hummingbirds
8. Plant sunflowers



Deeper Faith at UMEI Christian Highschool

"I am here. I am open. God is with us." These three simple sentences were repeated by students at UMEI Christian High School in Leamington to begin each chapel service during their Deeper Faith Days. Wendy Janzen, MCEC Eco-Minister, works with congregations to empower them in their worship and witness with their communities engaging in the important work of caring for God's creation.

She spent three days at UMEI doing just that, through three expanded chapel services as well as classroom workshops. The students and teachers listened to Wendy speak while huddled around a campfire. Each service began with a grounding exercise, followed by Scripture and words from Wendy, and then a solo, silent walk around the grounds, ending with a sharing time as a community.



Chani Wiens
Director of Enrollment and
Community Engagement, Teacher
UMEI Christian Highschool

The first day's theme was *Listening to Creation and Creator* and focused on praise – that all of creation praises God, including the birds and the trees and the sun. The second day revolved around *Lament and Hope*. Students each were given a card with the name of an endangered or threatened species from Essex County and were asked to consider how God saw that species and how God felt about their existence here on earth. The final day's focus was *Rooted & Grounded – Sacred Reciprocity*, and how we can give back to the earth from which we take so much.

The Kingdom of God is like water because it is everywhere, it flows through all living things and coats the earth with its healing.

- Justin Neufeld

A highlight was the smaller group sessions with Wendy, where students were asked to write a parable, which completes the sentence, "The Kingdom of God is like..." Grade 11 student Braedon Douglas shared, "The Kingdom of God is like a freshly cut tree stump. It seems to be all alone but if you look closely a whole new world grows out of it."

Another Grade 11 student, Justin Neufeld, wrote, "The Kingdom of God is like water. As I was walking, I noticed a puddle on the field. This made me notice the shine of the dew, and the moisture in the ground and the air. The Kingdom of God is like water because it is everywhere, it flows through all living things and coats the earth with its healing. Water does not have a form, it simply takes the form of whatever is holding the water. You pour water into a cup, it becomes the cup. The kingdom of God is like this, it takes many forms."

Students and staff alike felt encouraged, empowered and blessed by the time together as a community. "UMEI, like all Mennonite schools, is a place to combine solid academic learning with profound growth in our faith and relationship to God," remarked teacher and chapel coordinator Chani Wiens. "Not only did our time with Wendy educate UMEI students about creation care, it deeply rooted this care as an integral part of our relationship to the Creator. Wendy also connected us to our wider MCEC community and showed us different ways in which our churches can worship."



"God created the beautiful, uniquely wild environment for us to find peace."

- Raylene Schartner

Above: Wendy guides students on Deeper Faith Days as they engage in caring for God's creation.
Left: Students at UMEI Christian Highschool.

"Throughout the Deeper Faith days I found a unique understanding of how to connect with God without a roof between myself and the sky God created," reflected Grade 12 student Raylene Schartner. "God created the beautiful, uniquely wild environment for us to find peace."



How am I going to take care of the world?

We care about the environment because God created it and we are part of this ecosystem was the overall sentiment at Mennonite Fellowship of Montreal's (MFM) recent fall retreat on ecotheology. The retreat centre just outside of Montreal provided the perfect setting for Wendy Janzen, MCEC Eco-Minister, to guide the congregation into a

deeper conversation in what has been a central theme for them over the past year.

Annika Krause, pastor at Mennonite Fellowship of Montreal, said, "Our faith and understanding of scripture, and who God is and who he calls us to be, needs to blend into our practical lives. To separate them is to do a disservice."

The command to love your neighbour as yourself expands when we begin to look at all of creation.

Throughout the weekend, people shared how enlightening it was to think about spiritual duty in creation care. Wendy challenged them to think about what it means to be a good neighbor. She shared her own experience of moving into her new home and finding the names of neighbours etched on the brick wall of her front porch. These names included next-door neighbours, animals and plants and were a gift from the previous owners of their home.

“The command to love your neighbor as yourself expands when we begin to look at all of creation as active participants in scripture,” Mary Lou Docherty, a participant, said. “We need to be aware of our surroundings, appreciate them and



Photo Left: Montreal Mennonite Fellowship prays at their retreat. Above: Enjoying God's creation.

notice them. We need to feel that connection so that we are motivated by heart and not just by the head. The way to do that is by going outside. It's a worshipful experience for me.”

James Bugden, another participant, offered advice to people who do not know how to begin thinking about creation care. He explained, “You don't ignore a problem with your toe because it's small and there are ten of them, you take care of your body. I think that goes broadly for the rest of the world.”

Although many shared discouragement about the current state of the world, this retreat also gave them hope for the future. Dory Reimer expressed that “being sheltered from nature has made us destroyers of nature but that spirituality and ecotheology is a new path that could work to inspire people to care.”

“This is not just something that I should do, but this is a part of us. We often talk about what our footprint is, and that's very practical. This is not usually part of my religious discussions but I see that change comes on a personal spiritual level,” said Margaret McDowell.



Communion in God's wonderful outdoors.

Mel Shantz reflected that growing up in a theology that spends time asking what you are going to do as a group to make the world better has been beneficial for him. “I'm old enough to remember what life was like for my parents, providing their own food,” said Mel. “The idea of a garden is something that I grew up around and it made sense. I realized that we've gotten away from that. The question now is what my role is going to be. How am I going to make the world better? How am I going to take care of the world?”



This is All God's Earth Annual Fish-Walk in Markham

“I’m an avid fisherman,” says James Barber, member at Hagerman Mennonite Church and MCEC Executive Council member. “Looking at the big picture, I understand a lot more than the fish do about what is going on around them. In the same way, God understands a lot more than I do about what is going on around me.”

Every April, two weeks before trout season opens, James sends out an invitation to the community in Markham. “Seeing native trout or salmon spawn is an awesome experience. Bring: Boots, or sturdy shoes,” the invitation reads.

What started out for James as a way to spend time outdoors as

*I sometimes think
our faith is too
small. This is all
God's earth.*

a family has turned into an annual community event. "A fish-walk really lends itself to being together as a community. It sometimes isn't easy to invite people to a worship service but it's really easy to come out to a fish-walk," says James. "You get a chance to meet some people and connect a little bit while seeing a couple hundred fish."

Looking at the big picture, I understand a lot more than the fish do about what is going on around them. In the same way, God understands a lot more than I do about what is going on around me.

The fish-walk starts at a park and proceeds upstream to the dam followed by a slow walk downstream. Along the way, there are many things to notice and James points out old parts of the dam, an old mill, trees

in the wood and the fishery. They then find the trout and they witness first-hand the energy and spiritedness of the active fish. The water might be murky and other days it might be clear. The fish might be aggressive and territorial with each other and if it is a bright and sunny day, they might even be spooked. James may even toss a stick into the water to grab the attention of the fish. All the while, he explains what the fish are doing and why they are behaving in certain ways. It is a fun day for people of all ages – one that James looks forward to each year.

"Often you have spiritual things like a church service, and you have outdoor things like going for a walk. I sometimes think our faith is too small. This is all God's earth," says James. "I don't feel the need to over spiritualize the fish-walk. It is in God's outdoors and God is just there with us. God is present."



Fish-walk sights - spawning trout.



James Barber, avid fisherman.



Peace by a stream.



Farming in Benin Pastoral Support at BBI

"The agricultural project at Benin Bible Institute focuses on learning good farming methods and how to grow things in a way that doesn't destroy the environment," says Sue Shantz of St. Jacobs Mennonite Church.

Many congregations in Benin, West Africa, cannot afford to pay their pastors. Benin Bible Institute (BBI) is an interdenominational Bible

school that provides biblical and theological training for pastors who give spiritual guidance to churches and institutions throughout the country. They began to dream of long-term solutions for their graduating students. How might their students support themselves and their families upon graduation? Were there possibilities of combining pastoral training with agricultural skills?

How might their students support themselves and their families upon graduation?

BBI purchased twelve acres of land in Oumako, Benin. Despite obstacles related to funding and lack of knowledge on how to develop the project, they began slowly moving forward. They found the training they needed and the project began to take shape. They invested their time and energy into developing an agricultural site.

Everything done at BBI is connected to who they are as followers of Jesus.

They dug a well, built a water tower and installed an irrigation system. They created space for animals and began to till the land to grow vegetables, plantain bananas, papayas and mango trees, among others. "This was part of the training program at BBI to give students additional skills that could help them when they would be assigned or accept a ministry position in a rural setting," says Sue.

As the students learned agricultural skills, the site flourished. They learned more efficient and innovative methods of crop management and animal husbandry to improve the quality of life for

their families and for those in the villages where they would eventually minister. Not only did the students learn about sustainable agricultural practices, but also BBI was able to invest in the community around the farm by paying local women to harvest the produce.

As the agricultural project became more established, international funding was gradually reduced.

BBI has a number of professors who will soon be retiring and current professors who need more training so BBI can continue to provide high-level education. A Fund has been established to specifically support pastoral training and donations can be given through MCEC, Benin Bible Institute (an International Witness partnership) designating it for the BBI Faculty Development Fund.

St. Jacobs, Poole and Wanner Mennonite churches have built relationships with pastors and leaders at BBI for many years. "Everything done at BBI is connected to who they are as followers of Jesus and how they live that out," says Sue. "The agricultural project is one example of that."



Benin Bible Institute Farm

Rabbits are sold to local restaurants, as well as for local consumption. Chickens are interbred, combining the disease resistance of local varieties with the superior size and egg production of imported chickens.

Carrots, eggplant, hot peppers, cabbage and greens are among the vegetables grown for the local market.

Trees planted on the farm include moringa, acacia, eucalyptus and mango.

These items are popular in markets across Benin, and should be steady income producers for BBI. The BBI farm is well on the way to becoming a significant income generator for BBI programs.



The stories in Sprout represent just a small portion of what God is doing in MCEC. Your prayers, words of encouragement, donations and gifts of time play in the background of each story. Together we are transformed by the love of God, inspired by the hope we find in Jesus and called to action by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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