



Deep green impact: The church caring for the environment

As I took the pulpit that morning, there were two conflicting emotions stirring within me—fear and excitement. I have preached many messages on controversial topics, but never one that could be so potentially polarizing to the congregation or detrimental to my position in ministry. However, I was also so excited about the opportunity and the momentum of the moment, I couldn't wait to see what was going to happen. Hopefully what I had seen in Scripture, heard from God, and read from well-respected Christian leaders from centuries ago was still relevant today. I couldn't be missing it, could I?

This message had the potential to be quite politically charged. It had everything to do with politics and nothing to do with politics. More than anything, it was about doing the right thing at the right time for both my church and my community. I had to shed my inhibitions and insecurities in order to be obedient to what I felt like the Lord was leading me to share with my church. How would the congregation respond? There was only one way to find out.

As soon as I finished my message I was in for the shock of a lifetime. With my "great" faith, I thought the response could be anywhere from throwing me out on my ear to a tepid reception before a warm embrace. Never could I have imagined what happened next.

Instead of any of my worst or (admittedly limited) greatest expectations coming true, I watched in awe at the end of both services that morning as the congregation rose to their feet and applauded. Over my 25 years in ministry, that has never happened to me. I have received plenty of pats on the back or firm handshakes with an additional "atta



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boy” but never a standing ovation. It was in that moment that I knew this was more than a timely message. This was something that our church community on that particular Sunday morning had rediscovered as a responsibility. It wasn’t something that was in conflict with their faith or even their political beliefs. It was shedding light on a responsibility the church not only has, but a responsibility the church has to be leading the nations on this issue.

And the issue? The church’s responsibility to environmental stewardship. Simply put, the church must be diligent to tend the garden God has given us.

In the nearly four years that has transpired since this event, we have witnessed the beauty of what happened when we wove our fledgling Let’s Tend the Garden environmental ministry with other outreach-oriented ministries. Though our initial intent was to do something that was merely good and right in the eyes of the Lord, we never quite realized how the simplicity of such a message could also be a connecting point in personifying the hands and feet of Jesus.

When we started Let’s Tend the Garden, our goal was to equip and mobilize people in our congregation to take a greater lead in caring for the environment within our community. We started a recycling program at church called “Tithe Your Trash” where members could drop off their recycled goods on Sunday mornings if they didn’t have curbside pickup. We also worked with the U.S. Forest Service to help

with projects such as campground cleanup, repairing trails, planting trees and GPS trail mapping. Teams flew into the vast Idaho wilderness to remove noxious weeds. The momentum created behind our efforts even earned our church a volunteer award from the U.S. Forest Service.

Over time, we began to see how some of our other ministry outreaches fit into a bigger picture of Let’s Tend the Garden. For example, our benevolence ministry faithfully feeds families each week through our food pantry. Once we started a naturally-grown garden on our church property, it made perfect sense to funnel that fresh produce to our benevolence ministry.

We also partnered with other ministries in the church to hold sustainable living classes. Participants learned how to can food or grow an organic garden.

In an effort to get people to care for the environment, we realized more people needed to experience it in order to develop that deep love for the outdoors. So, we

set up family hikes and campground clean ups along with nature walks along the Boise River. Such experiences served a two-fold effort of inspiring people to care for creation as well as spending time together with their family and others in their church community.

We also saw how some of the benefits of recycling could help fund other ministry ventures. When Hurricane Katrina struck the U.S., we parlayed a recycled cell phone drive into money to help pay for volunteers to go on one-week trips to New Orleans for cleanup work. As



a result, we managed to send a team per week to New Orleans for 12 straight weeks.

Any time you are pioneering a ministry, there are plenty of challenges. One of the biggest challenges any ministry faces is engagement. So before we ever announced our new care for this value to the church, we had plenty of opportunities lined up and in place for people to volunteer immediately. That alone helped us build momentum quickly in what otherwise could have been an arduous task. We also faced some rejection from people who couldn't see past the politics of the environment and thought we were becoming too liberal. But those challenges have been trumped by lives our Let's Tend the Garden ministry has blessed.

As we have sought to reduce our footprint, we have garnered the respect of the community and broke down barriers to those who have long held the church suspect for their unwillingness to actively engage in caring for the environment. It has opened doors for me to speak on secular college campuses all across the nation without ever watering down the powerful message of redemption in the Gospel. In just a short period of time, we have witnessed how this message has enabled us to embody the Gospel message and empower people to do something about this beautiful world that God created.

RESOURCES

Saving God's Green Earth by Tri Robinson (Ampelton Publishing)

Small Footprint, Big Handprint: How to Live Simply and Love Extravagantly by Tri Robinson (Ampelton Publishing)

Small Footprint, Big Handprint small group DVD (Ampelton, \$24.99)

Let's Tend the Garden Web site:

<http://www.letstendthegarden.org>

Creation Care for Pastors:

<http://www.creationcareforpastors.com>

Creation Care (<http://www.creationcare.org>)

Over the last couple of years as we have entered into unsettling times, we have been able to see this message of stewardship not only bring life to our community but also our congregation. Our message on Small Footprint, Big Handprint: How to live simply and love extravagantly made a lasting impact on our people. Families down sized their homes; people got out of debt; individuals reorganized their lives—and it was all in the name of being free to serve others with the heart of Christ

when difficult times struck. Well, difficult times are here—and who knows for how long—and our church is prepared to serve a hurting community as a result of understanding how stewardship in all areas of our lives is imperative to making a greater impact.

The moment is right for the church to reverse its wrongs in the area of environmental stewardship. By abandoning our short-sighted thinking and returning long-term vision to the church, Christians have an opportunity to change things. It won't be easy. Many people from both liberal and conservative camps alike are likely to cast a suspicious eye on such a sudden reversal of position. But if the statistics are true and one-third of the world is comprised of Christians, what would happen if one-third of the world became serious about upholding the value of environmental stewardship? This would make a difference. This would change the world.

Two Ways

There are two ways to get enough: One is to continue to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less.

G.K. Chesterton