

Advance praise for
Church, Creation, and the Common Good

“Written from an Episcopal perspective, this curriculum helps facilitators guide a journey for Christian adult learners who seek to understand their faith in relationship to climate change. Heavy on theological foundations, the curriculum also provides concrete examples of how Christians are putting faith in action.”

—Shantha Ready Alonso, Executive Director
of Creation Justice Ministries

“This timely, essential, and accessible curriculum will enable churches to begin theologically reflective, practically oriented, necessary conversations for our common future.”

—Nurya Love Parish, founder of Plainsong
Farm and author of *Resurrection Matters*

“Ragan and Emily Sutterfield have put together an immensely helpful curriculum to help our congregations reflect on who we are and where we live in regards to the multitude of environmental challenges we face, including the changing climate. This book moves us into being a part of the solution and helps us become bearers of hope to this world.”

—Bingham Powell, Rector of St. Mary’s
Episcopal Church in Eugene, Oregon

“This curriculum couldn’t be more urgently needed. Accessible and adaptable, sobering and hopeful, *Church, Creation, and the Common Good* offers scripturally sound, liturgically rooted ways of responding to the profound challenges of climate change, now and in the future.”

—Debra Dean Murphy, associate professor of Religious
Studies at West Virginia Wesleyan College and
serves on the board of The Ekklesia Project

CHURCH,
CREATION,
and the
COMMON
GOOD

Guidance in an Age of Climate Crisis

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Emily Sutterfield

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Church Publishing Incorporated
Editorial Offices
19 East 34th Street
New York, NY 10016

Cover design by: Jennifer Kopec, 2 Pug Design
Typeset by: PerfectType, Nashville, TN
Printed in the United States of America

A record of this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-1-64065-111-1 (pbk.)
ISBN: 978-1-64065-112-8 (ebook)

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PREFACE

As we were finishing these session plans, record-breaking floods were affecting a large swath of the central United States. Suddenly, poor drainage systems were at their capacity and streets all around where we work and play were flowing with torrents of water. And yet, unlike other hot topics of the day such as racism, gun control, and immigration, we saw little to no discussion of the climate crisis in our churches. “The weather sure is strange,” many people would say around the coffee hour table, but no one would then link that statement to how we inhabit the world.

We may feel that weather is the kind of thing about which we have no say or control, and so it seems to occupy a different place in our politics and practice than issues like racism. But the reality is that weather, though we cannot control it directly, is very much affected by the systems we embrace and the ways in which we live. Like racism, we are now reaping some of what our ancestors created and, just by accepting the status quo, we are still perpetuating the underlying systems that enforce it.

We need to talk about this reality. We need to name it and explore it and address it. And we need to start this work in our churches.

Why the Church? Because the Church is a place where we are concerned with the questions of human flourishing and right living

within the context of a loving relationship with God. We are not beholden to election cycles or the economics of the market (at least we shouldn't be). We are concerned with the call of God and our faithful response, a response that might put us at odds with the systems of this world.

The world needs the Church to explore this critical crisis of our time, but for us to do so, we need to first talk with one another and discern what God is calling us to in our particular places. Only then can we offer life-giving possibilities to a world that is literally drowning in denial.

To begin this work we need to know what we are getting into. Here are some things to ponder before getting started.

Climate change is a complex and worrying issue.

Climate change is widely regarded as the most critical issue of our age, affecting global conflicts, poverty, economies, food supplies, and more. We find ourselves entangled in a situation we did not create and are scrambling to correct, though that correction will require significant changes to our most basic ways of life in modern, industrial countries. At the same time, climate disasters are already occurring. Whether it is rising sea levels threatening coastal communities or forest fires raging in the water-hungry West, our situation is one of increasingly unpredictable weather. Many people are deeply concerned about this reality, and therapists have begun to report increased visits from patients with environmentally induced anxieties. *Churches have a tremendous opportunity to show the love and peace of Christ in this age of climate anxiety.*

Creative and inspiring steps can be taken by churches.

The Church could be a place where skills for resilience and flourishing through the climate crisis are cultivated and disseminated.

Workshops on gardening, canning, and water collection would bring together community members. Churches could set up co-op structures to share space, time, and resources in more sustainable ways. Churches could be places that advocate and demonstrate steps to transition away from a lifestyle dependent on factors that contribute to climate change and into an alternative lifestyle of restoration. We invite you to help your group seek some of their own creative solutions together throughout this class. *Instead of fear and helplessness, we (as the Church) could offer hope and empowerment.*

We must stay informed and be prepared.

We highly recommend that facilitators and group members spend time researching some of these issues around climate change. Please find suggested readings and videos in Appendix E. Because climate change is constantly in flux and manifests differently in various locations, we suggest that for each section you come up with your own vision and findings before leading the class. It is best to have local examples of your own to share in connection with each section. *In this way, we can practice a version of the advice of the famous theologian Karl Barth to “take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.”¹*

Here’s how this curriculum takes a different approach.

This curriculum sets out to address these challenges by taking on climate change from a different direction than it is often approached in church. First, we assume climate change as a reality that is here and will have catastrophic effects no matter what people do at this

1. From “Barth in Retirement,” *Time Magazine*, Friday, May 31, 1963. <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,896838,00.html> (accessed March 12, 2018).

point. This is important because it changes how we respond. Unlike many programs that have tried to prevent climate change, this program asks how do we properly live as Church in the midst of the climate crisis and work to be resilient communities in our particular places? Second, this curriculum works to engage a broad base within the Church by using the questions the climate crisis raises as a way to think about who we are as Church in this time and place. Our hope is that climate skeptics as well as enthusiastic “green-team” members will both fully engage this study and unify around the practices we call for rather than around a common worldview. *We do hope that worldview change will come, but we believe that practices are more fundamental than ideas and that ideas will change in response to practices.*

INTRODUCTION

This program resource started with a visit to Florida. Along the southwest coast, we visited a small Episcopal church involved in a number of ministries locally and abroad. They were proud of their fundraisers for struggling communities in Haiti that were suffering from the results of earthquakes and other disasters, and for their work with local people experiencing homelessness. Yet this church had little awareness or connection to the climate crisis that was literally rising all around them.

Current climate models show the coast of southwest Florida disappearing over the coming centuries through the slow but ever accelerating rise of the oceans. Already, local funding goes into sending truckloads of sand to the beaches that are disappearing more and more each year. Yet life is continuing as usual.

We came to this particular part of Florida hoping to see innovative models of how churches are dealing with the climate crisis, yet we found that most are simply following the pattern of the rest of us—the seas rise, but no one is talking about it.

According to models of the impact climate change will have over the next century, Florida is predicted to face some of the most profound challenges of all. Landscapes will change drastically. Life

cannot continue as it has over the past two hundred years. Change is inevitable for these communities.

Already, the weather and landscape are transforming. Hurricanes have become more severe and unseasonable. As massive sheets of ice melt into the ocean far away, sea levels are noticeably rising in spots along the coast of Florida. But when we tried to discuss these issues by phone and in person with different church groups in the area, we were often told that it is a difficult subject to address and nothing more came of it.

So we started to ask some questions, not only for churches in Florida but for churches everywhere. How might we serve God and our neighbor in a time of climate crisis? Are we in denial or simply unaware of the severity of the crisis? Did churches believe the question was too political and therefore wanted to avoid it altogether? Or was climate change simply too overwhelming to address? Perhaps the answer was a mixture of all of these concerns and more.

We started to wonder if this was just too tough an issue for churches to tackle. Then we stepped back and tried to imagine answers from a different angle. We started to look for creative examples of churches taking hopeful steps with regard to climate change, even if the issues weren't being directly discussed and addressed.

We found a Methodist Church in southwest Florida that offered some answers in small, yet deep ways for their community. They were doing it through relationship. Relationship with the different groups of people living in their neighborhood—long-term residents as well as migrant laborers. Relationship with their environment, like the watershed and soil. Not only did they worship and pray together, they also offered hurricane disaster relief to victims of storms. They created a permaculture farm on the empty lots by the church and generously shared the produce. They strived to know and love their land and people well. This church's leader seemed to be fearless in the face of difficult questions and pushed his congregation to be fearless as well.

From there, we visited a faith-based training center offering support to young farmers and agricultural development workers around the world. They experiment with appropriate solutions to the changing landscapes of our time. We observed some solutions such as seed-banks, water conservation tools, and new ways to grow food that require little money and infrastructure. We started to envision churches learning from such places—learning to be places of boldness and hope in the face of climate crisis.

Our visit to Florida was not as we imagined it would be. We were hoping to learn from churches that are directly dealing with the realities of climate change today. We were surprised that so little was being discussed and addressed.

But these later visits to the Methodist church and training facility helped us realize a few things:

- Creative and proactive steps that give folks hope are occurring.
- Deep relationship with local place and people can be nurtured.
- Churches cannot be silent any longer but need to be sensitive when addressing the issue of climate change.

After our trip to Florida, we spent time prayerfully outlining a way to address some of these issues. We combined various stories, reflections, prayers, and discussion topics to guide the process. What follows is a resource to help local congregations start looking at their church's role in a time of climate crisis.

This Study

What follows is a six-week course that seeks to engage the Church in the challenges climate change poses to our age. This class is broken into three main sections: *Ecclesia*, *Ecology*, and *Economy*. There will be two sessions connected to each section.

In the first section, *Ecclesia*, we focus on the resources and traditions of the Church. We begin not by looking at what climate change is but by looking at what the Church is. Then we move from that understanding to an exploration of how the Church should engage with climate change.

In the next section, *Ecology*, we start to explore the Church's relationship with home and place: where we live, who and what we live among, and so forth. Through a variety of exercises, we hope to reshape our view of the Church's connection to the wider neighborhood and community in the face of climate change.

In the last section, *Economy*, we examine our personal and collective responsibilities as we care for our households and use the goods of our places in ways that enable us to care for the common good of all, now and in the future.

In each section, we will invite you to identify and work from the assets of your community (rather than the deficits) with a goal toward flourishing for all. Together we can imagine how the Church can provide bold and new ways to move forward, not only in addressing climate change but other modern issues as well. Through an exploration of *Ecclesia*, *Ecology*, and *Economy*, it is our hope that churches can draw on their traditions and practices to become the *Communities for the Common Good* that the world needs now.

Facilitators and Participants

This publication serves as both a resource for facilitators and a participant's book. Your group may wish to share the leadership of facilitation, choosing a different leader each week; or you may wish to assign or rotate different leadership roles: worship leader, discussion facilitator, and scribe. There is space provided for individual journaling or notes the facilitator wishes to make.

It is our hope to make this an accessible resource and study guide for large groups and small, with the goal of having a plan of action at

its conclusion. All prayers and scriptures used are contained within the session plans, and the materials listed that will be needed are ones that are easily gathered in advance.

The Session Plans

This curriculum is deeply Episcopal in that it relies and draws on the prayers and liturgies of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Yet our hope is that Christ-followers of all traditions will be able to adapt this material to their own patterns of life and worship. Feel free to change parts of the sessions to fit your particular context.

There is a basic format for facilitating this curriculum through six consistent sessions that build upon each other. Included are ways to grow and expand the sessions through documentaries, connections with local experts, and ideas for hands-on projects. Modify and use these suggestions as you see fit for your particular group.

The basic framework breaks down each session into one-hour segments. Each session could definitely last longer through deeper discussions. We have strived to give congregations starting points, but our hope is that this will foster conversation and action steps beyond the group meetings.

Lastly, we suggest offering this as a Sunday morning option for your church group. This is how it was piloted. This time slot seems to draw in a variety of participants that might not otherwise have joined. Yet an evening course or weekend option could be a great gift to your church as well.

Our hope is that, as churches use this curriculum, we can learn from one another. What works? What could grow? What particular locations could use the curriculum in more direct ways (for example, setting up shelters for storm victims)? What creative steps do churches take that can offer others hope and direction? The Church needs a network to start addressing this difficult challenge of climate change together.

SESSION 1

Ecclesia, Part 1

Objectives

- To gain a clear perspective on what the Church should be
- To reflect on the Church as a Truth-Telling Community
- To explore the Church as an Agent of God's Work
- To deepen our understanding of the Church as a Vision of the Future

Materials

- Flip chart
- Markers
- Pens
- Images and key words, each cut out separately in advance from magazines and newspapers that remind you of possible ways to define the Church. (You may choose to have magazines, newspapers, and scissors available for participants to find their own as an extended activity.)

- ❑ Blank sheets of paper
- ❑ One copy of *Church, Creation, and the Common Good* for each participant

Reminders for the Facilitator

- Organize and set up the room with all materials ahead of time.
- Pray for all the participants before each session.
- Keep the conversation flowing, making room for all to share.
- Be open to listening more than sharing.
- Let the process unfold organically for each participant.

Welcome and Opening Prayer

(5 minutes)

Welcome to the first session of the class *Church, Creation, and the Common Good*. Make sure everyone has a seat where they can be seen and heard. Let them know that this will be a time of prayerful discernment together. You are there as a facilitator who is open to learn and grow with them.

During this first class, if there is adequate time, give each participant a chance to introduce themselves. Let them know who you are as well. If it is appropriate, share a bit about why you felt called to lead this class and invite everyone to share why they are interested in the topic.

Explain that during each session, we will open with a time of prayer. Read aloud the following prayer or allow a volunteer to read it aloud for the group.

Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ,

who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*²

Session Overview

(15 minutes)

Share:

In our first two sessions, we will be exploring what it means to be the Church. We are talking about Church in capital letters—not just about the one particular church we may be part of (though our particular church is a local representation of the Church at large). We sometimes refer to the Christian Church as *Ecclesia*.

Questions to Ponder:

- Thinking back to the prayer we just read, we are reminded that we are called to be “the Church” in faith and love. What does that mean?
- What is “the Church”?
- How do we define “the Church”?

After a few moments of silence, scatter the cut-out images and words on the floor in the middle of your circle.

- Choose a word or image that speaks to you when thinking of how you define “the Church.”
- Have blank paper as well. If you choose, you can draw your own image or write in your own word as well.

Go around the group and have everyone share their images or words with the group. Each participant can briefly explain why they chose their particular word or image. No one needs to share if they are not comfortable.

As specific thoughts are shared, write them on a flip chart.

2. “Collect for Proper 6,” *Book of Common Prayer*, 230.

Focus for the Day

(5 minutes)

Thank the group for sharing their thoughts. Explain in your own words that we all have many different ways of understanding the Church and it is indeed many things. The Church is a community, a people, an Agent of God's mission in the world. The Church can mean different things to different people at different seasons of their lives. All of this is important to be aware of and to respect.

The Church can also be very powerful. Therefore, we must continually reflect on what it *should* be through prayer and humility, and through study and conversation. How can we go deeper together to understand the Church?

To explore the meaning of "Church" more deeply, let us start by going to prayer and scripture. Prayers help us define our theology. Scripture serves as the authoritative guide for our lives. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*: It is prayer that leads to belief and it is liturgy that leads to theology.

We will use these two sources of prayer and scripture to help us better understand what the Church is supposed to be.

Break into pairs or smaller groups. Each team can have a different prayer and scripture to explore together. The facilitator should float between groups to help them stay on track in their conversations. (See Appendix A, pages 47–50.)

Group Reflection

(20 minutes)

Give the small groups plenty of time to discuss their prayers and scriptures. Encourage them to take notes and to be ready to share their key findings with the larger group.

Optional: Each group can come up with one image and word to define the Church together. Based on their particular scriptures or prayers, they can select from the leftover images and words of the first activity.

After time for reflection, gather everyone back together. Give each group time to briefly share their prayers and scriptures, summarizing what they discovered in their exploration of the prayers and scriptures.

Optional: If they choose a word and image, they can share and post these on blank chart paper. Each group can add to the same page, creating one large poster together.

After everyone has had a chance to share, take time to sum up the key points.

Key Points and Next Steps

(10 minutes)

From our readings and discussion, we have hopefully deepened our understanding of what the Church is about. Sometimes it is good to clear our perspectives and focus on key points.

Based on our readings, three important points stand out (write each heading on a flip chart sheet to use in later sessions):

1. *Truth-Telling Community*

God has called the Church to be a community that tells the Truth to each other and to the world. Throughout the week, think of what that means to be a Truth-Telling Community.

2. *Agents of God's Work*

God has called the Church to be an Agent of God's Work for renewing the world and restoring the common good. Throughout the week, think of what it means to be Agents of God's work.

3. *Vision of Hope for the Future*

God has called the Church to be a community that lives in the now but is guided by what God is working for in the future. Throughout the week, think of what it means to be a Vision of Hope for the Future.

In preparation for the next session:

- Look around for examples of people or groups that are living into our call to be the Church.
- Where in our community do you see people living into Truth?
- Where in the world do you see groups living as Agents of God's work?
- Where do you see communities living into hopeful visions of how God's Kingdom should be?

These may be examples within or outside of the Church. Come back ready to share what you find; bring images if you choose.

Closing Prayer

(5 minutes)

Close with *Prayers of the People, Form I* found in Appendix B on page 51. Encourage participants to add in their own petitions throughout the prayer. Volunteers can read different sections if you'd like.