

The Impact of One Sermon

- By HyeRan Kim and Don Schweitzer

A sermon is usually a congregational event situated in a worship service, connected to lectionary or other readings from scripture, as well as to other parts of the service such as prayers, hymns, and announcements. A sermon has a performative function. It is meant to do something, to make something happen.

In the early 1990s, David Hallman preached frequently on eco-theological themes as a guest speaker in churches. In August of 1990, he and Ursula Franklin focused on environmental issues as theme speakers at the United Church of Canada's 33rd General Council in London, Ontario. By 1993, Hallman had written two books on eco-theology, and a third was on its way to publication. One Sunday in 1993 or early 1994, he was the guest preacher at Eglinton United Church in Toronto and spoke on the place of ecological concern in Christian faith.

Virginia (Geegee) Mills was in the congregation that day. Hallman's sermon provoked her to wonder: "If care of the earth is a central tenet of our faith, why is there no mention of this in our Creed?" Mills belonged to an environmental group composed of United Church members in the United Church of Canada's Toronto Conference. She brought this idea to the group's next meeting. Out of the ensuing discussion came the idea of rectifying this lack with an addition to the United Church of Canada's A New Creed. Such an addition requires approval by the United Church of Canada's General Council or its Executive. One route to achieving this was by sending a resolution to General Council. Mills remembers that those involved "went through all the resolution hoops," and when it came to the General Council meeting the next August, it was passed.

While the 35th General Council passed the resolution, it couldn't agree on the wording of the addition. With the Council unable to agree, Stan McKay was asked as sitting Moderator to consult with others and develop an appropriate wording. He remembered delegates from Keewatin Presbytery advocating that the addition speak of care and respect for Creation. After listening to the conversation at General Council and reflecting on what he heard there, the phrase "to live with respect in Creation" emerged for him as an appropriate wording. This addition was significant for Indigenous communities, as it meant the inclusion of an important aspect of Indigenous worldviews in A New Creed.

There was some opposition to the idea of an addition to A New Creed. There was concern that if General Councils developed a habit of revising A New Creed, it might cease to be the widely representative and much-loved expression of the United Church's faith that it had become. However, there was no opposition to what the addition was intended to incorporate, and the idea of such an addition was received at General Council with a great deal of agreement and celebration.

After the General Council meeting McKay consulted with former moderator and United Church of Canada hymn writer Walter Farquharson, who recalled that the final selection of the words, “to live with respect in Creation,” were probably made by McKay and him together. The proposed phrase then went to the Theology and Faith committee of the United Church, chaired at that time by Marilyn Legge. Peter Wyatt had just come on as the staff person for the committee. The committee thoroughly discussed the proposed addition, then forwarded their recommendation for its adoption to General Council Executive to confirm. The Executive did so, and the phrase “to live with respect in Creation” was added to the A New Creed.

The United Church has a long tradition of summer camping and celebrating natural beauty, so what this addition expressed was not new to the spirituality of some United Church of Canada members. Still, while for some respect for Creation was part of Christian faith prior to the environmental movement, there has also been in the United Church a sense of Creation as raw material that receives value through being used by people in productive ways. Adding “to live with respect in Creation” to A New Creed explicitly acknowledged that Creation has a moral status independent of its use value, “and made abiding by this a matter of Christian confession, not individual choice.” This was a significant development in the United Church’s understanding of Christian faith and, in the wording chosen for the addition, an instance of reverse mission.

Here, the choice of words for this addition to the United Church of Canada’s confession of faith was influenced by the views of some of its Indigenous members. Many people and levels of church polity played various roles in this addition to A New Creed. The process by which this happened was begun by one person’s preaching and another person’s response to it.

Cherishing Creation – By Rev. Melody Duncanson Hales

Imagine a world where our actions today echo far into the future, where the choices we make now, matter tomorrow. This is the essence of Creation Time. It reminds us that our Earth isn't just a home; it's a divine gift. How we cherish this gift reveals our true relationship with the Creator.

Take a walk through downtown Capreol, just north of Sudbury, Ontario, and you’ll see Trinity United Church, situated on an intersection of street and railway, right in the heart of a bustling community. I met with Pastor Pam Brown, and leaders Faye Moffatt and Judy Sumner, who were excited to share Trinity’s green journey with me.

Judy shared about their solar panel installation. This was a decade-long labour of love, made real through the generous support of Trinity members and the United Church Faithful Footprints program. Trinity’s move to solar power goes beyond energy savings and cost reductions. Significant savings have allowed funds to be reallocated to support ministry. It is a step towards a future where sustainability is a way of life, a witness to Trinity’s hope for a healthy community today and tomorrow.

However, Trinity's commitment to creation doesn't stop there, Faye was quick to add. By partnering with the community garden and phasing out single-use plastics, they have established a foundation of environmentally conscious practices that span all areas of congregational life, from the food bank to facility use. This dedication speaks of a deeper theological commitment. It's about viewing the Earth and its resources, not as commodities to be exploited but as a sacred trust.

Liturgically, Creation Time is a time of heightened awareness and action. At Trinity, it's a season marked by special worship services integrating prayers, hymns, and photographs that reflect the beauty and sanctity of creation. Moreover, the community of faith finds unique ways to allow members to share their own sustainability practices, whether it's about conserving water, saving energy, or preserving food. These shared stories both inspire action and create a sense of communal responsibility.

It's inspiring how Trinity sees their eco-initiatives. For them, these steps are a simple and profound expression of their faith in a God who nourishes, sustains, and renews all. Supporting projects that champion climate action isn't a side activity—it's central to how Trinity lives their hope.

Stewardship reminds us that we are empowered to make choices with resources, whether of time or talent or wealth. Everything Trinity has done, large and small, are so much more than just a checklist of green initiatives. They are each a choice to use what they are given to make the most impact for their community and beyond. These acts of faithful stewardship are tangible expressions of the belief that when we care for the Earth, we are, in essence, fulfilling our God-given role as stewards of sacred gifts.

May you, too, find your own unique way to witness to hope and engage in faithful action, ever mindful of our divine calling as stewards of God's precious gift—our planet.

