

**Creation Care on the Home Front:  
Mobilizing the Local Faith Community to  
Creation Care in the Plaster Creek Watershed**

By David Warners, Gail Heffner, and Randall Van Dragt  
Calvin College Biology Department

Background

As a follow-up to last summer's CCCS supported Creation Care in Missions workshop, we are proposing a 2008 workshop that will include representatives from Calvin College, the Denominational Building of the Christian Reformed Church, and A Rocha USA. The idea for this proposed workshop arose from discussions among members of last summer's meetings and is seen as an integral aspect to the overall emphasis on infusing creation care into the mission efforts of the Christian Reformed Church. The backdrop for this proposal, the Plaster Creek Watershed, has been a concern and focus of study for the Calvin Environmental Assessment Program for several years. In 2004 several Calvin faculty and staff, together with a group of community partners formed the Plaster Creek Working Group, the goal of which is to connect Calvin College and the faith community with community partner efforts to improve this highly degraded waterway. The proposal described here pulls together the insights, passions and expertise of all the above-mentioned groups in an attempt to promote cooperation and restoration in the socially and biologically challenged Plaster Creek Watershed.

Issue Addressed and Objectives

The idea for this particular proposal emerged initially from discussions during last summer's workshop. These ideas have come into clearer focus during meetings with Calvin faculty and administrators at the denominational building, as well as meetings

with the CRWRC board of directors and regional team leaders. What has become clear is that while creation care needs to be an integral part of the gospel our mission agencies spread to partners in other countries, our partner organizations typically already understand the importance of creation care principles for bringing healing to a broken world. For example, 80% of Kenyans are still farmers and they understand full well the importance of a flourishing creation for supporting a flourishing human community. Instead, we recognize that an un-reached mission field with this type of full gospel message (Mark 16:15)<sup>1</sup> is our own church in North America.

In fact, when organizations like CRWRC and CRWM promote creation care to our partners throughout the world, this message has the potential of sounding inconsistent if we are not engaged in such activities in our home places. In Pentecost and Missions Harry Boer emphasizes the importance of a common vision for the sending church and its missionary ministries:

Therefore the official bodies of the Church and her members individually have full and legitimate claim upon the guidance and power of the Spirit only when they stand in communion with the total manifestation of the Church of which they are a part. An ecclesiastical missionary administration that functions apart from or in relative indifference to the Church as an organism has neither right nor reason to suppose that it is standing in the New Testament tradition of missionary witness.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, this proposal will focus on developing a cohesive plan for implementing concrete creation care outreach efforts at the CRC denominational building and through a

---

<sup>1</sup> The American Standard Translation reads, “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation.” It is appropriate to ask what it means to preach the good news to all of creation; we would like to think this proposal is a working out of this mandate and that it will result in some good news being preached to the Plaster Creek watershed, which includes the people in the watershed, but not exclusively so.

<sup>2</sup> Harry Boer, *Pentecost and Missions*(Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), p. 216

group of local Christian Reformed Churches (Woodlawn CRC, Roosevelt Park CRC, Alger Park CRC and Madison Square CRC).

The denominational building and these four churches have been selected for this proposal because they all exist within the watershed of Plaster Creek. A watershed is an area of land that all drains to a common body of water,<sup>3</sup> and the common water body in this watershed, Plaster Creek, is a stream that is in great need of attention and restoration. Water quality analyses of this creek have determined it to be unsafe for even partial human body contact. It is considered to be the most degraded stream in the Grand Rapids area.<sup>4</sup> Since Plaster Creek drains into the Grand River, its problems are transported downstream and eventually into Lake Michigan. Therefore, restoration activities within this watershed will have significance for other people, other creatures and other habitats in the broader landscape of West Michigan.

What we are suggesting is a type of re-orientation similar to that which occurred last summer through the Creation Care in Missions workshop, only this time the focus groups are not partner organizations and focus communities overseas, instead they are our denominational headquarters and local CRC congregations right here at home.

Theologian John Hall emphasizes that

Christian faith implies a decisive orientation toward this world, which makes the question of “the fate of the earth” a matter of ultimate concern for Christians.<sup>5</sup>

What we desire is for Christians in the Plaster Creek watershed to become motivated to a heightened sense of responsibility not simply because ‘greening’ seems to be an

---

<sup>3</sup> Mark B. Bush, *Ecology of a Changing Planet, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall), p. 336.

<sup>4</sup> Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, *Total Maximum Load for Biota for Plaster Creek, Kent County, Michigan* (Michigan DEQ, 2002)

<sup>5</sup> John Hall, *Imaging God, Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), p. 59

increasingly popular cultural dynamic, but because in so doing we are responding to the full gospel and learning, as image bearers of the Creator, to love the world as he does.

Biblical scholar N. T. Wright celebrates this awakening by writing:

. . . I know that God's new world of justice and joy, of hope for the whole earth, was launched when Jesus came out of the tomb on Easter morning, and I know that he calls his followers to live in him and by the power of his Spirit and so to be new-creation people here and now, bringing signs and symbols of the kingdom to birth on earth as in heaven. The resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit mean that we are called to bring real and effective signs of God's renewed creation to birth even in the midst of the present age. Not to bring works and signs of renewal to birth within God's creation is ultimately to collude, as Gnosticism always does, with the forces of sin and death themselves.<sup>6</sup>

The objectives of this project are twofold: 1) to design a series of outcomes for the denominational building (perhaps environmentally friendly remodeling plans, rain gardens, alternative landscaping, alternative energy sources, etc.) that will give tangible evidence of a commitment to creation care; and 2) to develop an approach (possibly including a video, powerpoint presentations, interactive website, etc.) for mobilizing the four churches listed above to begin enacting "real and effective signs of renewal" that will contribute to improved quality of the creek.

While not a specific objective of this proposal, we do plan to submit a follow-up proposal for a workshop in the summer of 2010 that will take what we have learned from these activities and develop a generalizable tool kit or manual for engaging faith communities in other parts of North America in creation care activities. In this way, the project described here will provide a model for considering a more broadly applicable approach. These efforts, particularly the plan for a transferable manual, have been encouraged and supported by Mr. Tom Rowley, North American Executive Director of A

---

<sup>6</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), p. 209.

Rocha, an international Christian environmental organization. Mr. Rowley was attracted to these ideas because he is faced with the same challenge we are trying to address: How to engage the North American faith community in tangible, meaningful creation care praxis.

### Watershed Concept

Watersheds are naturally designated portions of the landscape that have the potential to knit together agricultural, urban and natural areas into an integrated, interactive whole. Every business, school, church and individual household necessarily exists within a watershed and the quality of the water that flows out of a watershed indicates quite clearly what type of activities are occurring within that watershed. Therefore, we believe a general understanding of the watershed concept and the particular quality of one's local watershed to be a highly effective means for connecting people and institutions to the importance of creation care in the places where they exist.<sup>7</sup>

### Plaster Creek Watershed

The Plaster Creek Watershed is a 57 mi<sup>2</sup> area of southeastern greater Grand Rapids that drains into Plaster Creek. This watershed includes sections of municipalities of Grand Rapids, Wyoming, Kentwood, and East Grand Rapids, as well as the townships of Gaines, Caledonia, Cascade, Ada and Grand Rapids. This watershed includes agricultural areas in Caledonia and Dutton, upper middle class neighborhoods in Cascade and Kentwood, lower income communities in Burton Heights and industrial zones near downtown Grand Rapids. Plaster Creek itself runs for approximately 12 miles, emptying

---

<sup>7</sup> Alabama Rivers Alliance and Southern Environmental Law Center, *Alabama Water Agenda, Building the Way to Healthy Waters* (Alabama Rivers Alliance and Southern Environmental Law Center, 2007)

into the Grand River near the Grand Rapids Sewage Treatment Facility about 1 mile southwest of the center of Grand Rapids.

A report supported by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality in 2002 determined that Plaster Creek supports poor fish and macroinvertebrate communities, and that this stream carries dangerously high levels of *E. coli*, measured as much as 50 times greater than the allowable concentration for safe human contact. The primary sources of these dangerously high levels of harmful bacteria likely include stormwater runoff (that includes automobile exudates and lawn chemicals), agricultural runoff (fertilizers and heavy sediment loads) and illicit discharges.<sup>8</sup>

And yet, there are areas of the watershed that still retain high natural quality that reflect conditions prior to European immigration. Paris Park and Ken-O-Sha woods are beautiful examples of woodlands that protect the stream with trees that are in excess of 100 years old. Three state-listed plant species have been documented in Ken-O-Sha woods alone, including *Diarrhena americana* (Beak grass), a state-threatened species that is known from only 5 other counties in Michigan. Furthermore, Plaster Creek is still used as spawning habitat for Lake Michigan salmon, and areas along the creek support healthy populations of White-tailed deer, Red fox, Wild turkey as well as a number of increasingly uncommon neotropical migratory bird species. Although significantly degraded, the watershed does retain elements of its original functionality and beauty.

The Plaster Creek Working Group is an informal collection of Calvin faculty and staff, together with representatives from the West Michigan Environmental Action Council and other local partner agencies that have been meeting regularly since 2002 to

---

<sup>8</sup> Fishbeck, Thompson, Carr and Huber *Plaster Creek Watershed Management Plan* (Fishbeck, Thompson, Carr and Huber, 2008)

discuss ways to improve the quality of Plaster Creek. Calvin College is especially well-situated to contribute to such a group since half of our campus is located in the watershed at the headwaters of Whiskey Creek, a tributary of Plaster Creek. In addition, approximately 50% of Calvin faculty and staff live within the watershed together with over 3200 Calvin alumni. If we as a confessional community are responding to the Biblical mandate to care for the creation, then such a response should be evident in the quality of the watershed in which we live.

In a recent (spring, 2008) meeting of the Plaster Creek Working group, Calvin College representatives were specifically challenged by Janice Tompkins, Senior Scientific Analyst from of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality to help her reach the faith community in the watershed. She, as well as other community partners from West Michigan Environmental Action Council (Rachel Hood), Annis Water Research Institute (Betty Gajewski), Grand Valley Metro Council (Andy Bouman) and Fishbeck, Thomopson, Carr and Huber (Wendy Ogilvie), expressed great frustration in efforts to engage churches and individual Christian homeowners to actively care about the quality of the watershed. To have such an obvious groaning of creation in the midst of a faith community that long has embraced the goodness and sanctity of God's creation raises significant tension and begs for reconciliation. This proposal is in part an effort to address this tension and begin to respond to the challenge forwarded by our community partners.

#### Means and Methodology

For this project we will convene a week-long workshop (June 23-25) that will involve faculty, staff and students from Calvin College, representatives from the CRC

denominational building and a representative from A Rocha North America. In this workshop we will begin by introducing the participants to the particular challenges encountered in the watershed. We will do this with presentations from local partner agencies and with a field trip that will survey the variety of land uses in the watershed. We will proceed with full-group meetings to engage biblical foundations for creation care and a detailed description of the natural history of the Plaster Creek Watershed. The full group meetings will be punctuated with breakout working sessions in two main groups. These two groups will work on producing 1) An action plan for developing the denominational headquarters as a model for sustainable operations; and 2) A series of presentations to mobilize the four local churches.

On Thursday, June 25, we will invite two representatives from each of the four local churches to receive input from them for the implementation strategies that have been developed for these churches. This will be an integral part of the workshop and will represent a first step in engaging these local congregations. On the last day of the workshop we will develop action plans, with specific schedules for achieving the goals we have set forth. To carry these plans forward it is critical that we establish an outreach coordinator for this project, a person we have already identified as Peter Hiskes. Peter is a recent Biology graduate of Calvin who is a member of Eastern Avenue CRC and has worked extensively with both Professors Van Dragt and Warners on a variety of creation care restoration projects on Calvin's campus. Peter is also very active in social and environmental justice issues in the Grand Rapids area and is someone we feel is uniquely equipped to fulfill this task.

We envision that Peter will be the key person to help plan, initiate and carry out this project. He will begin (May, 2009) by developing an assessment tool to be administered in each of the churches before any activities are initiated. Peter will also work with administrators in the denominational building to assess the CRC headquarters' carbon footprint before any creation care elements are implemented. In this way baseline data will be established from which we will be able to assess (post implementation) the effectiveness of our efforts. Peter will also be integrally involved in planning and running the workshop, and he will take the products of the workshop, develop them further as need be, make presentations to the focus congregations and assist them with planning and implementing activities. During this process Peter will also review existing faith-based initiatives for creation care and begin to compile the manual that will be the focus of our planned CCCS proposal for 2010. We have received verbal commitment from A Rocha North America to share the cost of Peter's salary, as well as assurance from Mr. Fritz Rottman to financially assist this effort. Therefore, we are asking CCCS to contribute 40% of the salary (\$10,000) of Peter's position, which we feel is critical for this project to succeed.

#### Participants from Calvin College (7)

**David Warners**, Biology Department (Workshop Co-convener)

David has done extensive botanical inventories of the Plaster Creek corridor, is a board member of the West Michigan Land Conservancy, participates in the Plaster Creek Working Group and lives in the watershed. Dave will lend expertise as a scientist and Christian environmental activist.

**Gail Heffner**, Director of Community Engagement (Workshop Co-convener)

Gail is one of the initiators of the Plaster Creek Working Group and as Director of Community Engagement is well connected and well respected among partner organizations involved with Plaster Creek. Gail will be responsible for insuring that our efforts fit within the broader environmental initiatives in the watershed.

**Randall Van Dragt**, Biology Department (Workshop Co-convener)

Randy is a major figure in the conservation community of West Michigan and has conducted research on vertebrate communities along Plaster Creek for two decades. As an ecosystem ecologist and long-term environmental activist, Randy will contribute significantly to disseminating natural history data to the workshop participants.

**Clarence Joldersma**, Education Department

Clarence is a member of the Plaster Creek Working Group and an ardent environmentalist. As a Philosopher of Education, he will lend his expertise to the development of presentations for the four focus congregations.

**Peter Hiskes**, Restoration Project Manager, Calvin College graduate

Peter has been involved in a series of forest restoration efforts on Calvin's campus. He is a former director of the Calvin College student Environmental Stewardship Coalition and a local social and environmental activist. Peter's thoughtful demeanor and environmental background uniquely equip him to fulfill the position of Project Outreach Coordinator.

**Jessica Driesenga**, Biology/Religion double major, Calvin student

Jessica is a student with particular interests in Reformed Theology and how it informs environmentalism. In the summer of 2008 she was an intern for Dr. Calvin DeWitt, working on a project to coordinate Christian environmental initiatives across North America.

**One additional Calvin College Student**

#### Participants from the CRC Denominational Offices (6)

**Andrew Ryskamp**, Director of CRWRC

As director of CRWRC, Andy has made great progress in implementing an action plan developed in the 2008 Creation Care in Missions workshop. Andy has also been instrumental in sensitizing other offices in the CRC denominational building and continues to be a visionary for Christian environmental stewardship.

**Peter VanderMeulen**, Coordinator of the CRC Office of Social Justice

Peter has been an advocate of social justice issues in the CRC for many years and has more recently been active in the area of environmental justice as well. Peter's vast experience with the CRC will be invaluable in developing plans for the denominational offices and as we reach out to local congregations.

**Kate Kooyman**, Congregational Justice Mobilizer for the CRC

Kate was an active participant in the Creation Care in Missions workshop in 2008 and has been promoting creation care, along with social justice, in local congregations. Kate's participation in this workshop will be vital for successfully connecting with the four focus congregations.

**Alice Bouwma**, Stewardship Coordinator, CRWRC

Alice was also a significant contributor to the 2008 workshop on Creation Care in Missions. She has been promoting sustainable practices in all aspects of CRWRC and will be a valuable resource for extending these efforts to the denominational building.

**Ben Becksvoort**, Christian Reformed Home Missions Regional Leader, Great Lakes Team (to be confirmed)

As Great Lakes team leader for CRHM, Ben is the person who oversees outreach efforts for churches that include the four focus congregations in this proposal. Ben will be an critical bridge to effectively work with these churches. He also brings significant theological understanding and many years of experience in the CRC.

**John Bolt**, Director of Finance and Administration for the CRC

John is the head of finances for the CRC and has begun to consider alternative, more environmentally friendly options for operating the denominational building. John brings great credibility to this effort in terms of fiscal responsibility and implementation options.

Participant from A Rocha USA (1)

**Tom Rowley**, CEO, A Rocha USA

As Director of the largest Christian environmental organization in the US, Tom has been extremely supportive of this project. He is particularly interested in our efforts and is eager to utilize the manual for mobilizing faith communities to creation care that we plan to develop from this experience.

Participants for one full day session (13)

Representatives from partner organizations (Tuesday, June 23):

**Andy Bouman**, Staff, Grand Valley Metro Council

**Betty Gajewski**, Staff, Annis Water Resources Institute

**Rachel Hood**, Director, West Michigan Environmental Action Council

**Wendy Ogilvie**, Scientific Analyst, Fishbeck Thompson, Carr and Huber

**Janice Tompkins**, Senior Environmental Quality Analyst, Michigan  
Department of Environmental Quality

Two representatives from each of the following (Thursday, June 25):

Roosevelt Park CRC

Alger Park CRC

Woodlawn CRC

Madison Square CRC

## Outcomes

1. Action Plan for Denominational Headquarters
2. Implementation Strategy for Engaging local churches
  - this will include efforts to mobilize the churches themselves to initiate creation care activities, as well as encourage these churches to reach out to their communities by possibly sponsoring neighborhood meetings, educational outreach, work days, etc. (to be facilitated by the project outreach coordinator)
3. Transferrable Manual or Tool Kit for mobilizing faith communities in creation care activities (To be finalized in 2010)

## Timeline

### **May/June 2009**

Peter Hiskes develops an assessment tool and administers it to the four focus congregations. He also works with denominational administrators (including John Bolt) to evaluate the carbon footprint of the denominational office. Peter will also help in planning for the workshop and begin reviewing faith based initiatives for creation care.

### **June 23-25, 2009**

Workshop held at the Bunker Interpretive Center of Calvin College.

### **July – August, 2009**

Initial action plans for denominational building will begin, presentations to local congregations will be finalized, research on faith-based initiatives will continue.

### **September, 2009 – April, 2010**

Peter will give presentations at churches and assist them in developing strategies for implementing creation care activities. He will also facilitate implementation activities at the denominational office. During this time Peter will also begin to develop the generalizable manual for mobilizing faith-based communities.

### **October, 2009**

Submit project proposal to CCCS for workshop in summer, 2010.

### **April, 2010**

Peter will administer follow-up assessment to the four congregations and a second evaluation of the carbon footprint of the denominational office. He will prepare a project report that includes a summary of his activities and the results of the surveys.

## Budget

See attached spreadsheet

## Estimated Additional Funding Sources

A Rocha North America	(\$12,500)
Rottman Trust	(\$2500)

## Bibliography

- Alabama Rivers Alliance and Southern Environmental Law Center. 2007. Alabama Water Agenda – Guiding the Way to Healthy Waters. Alabama Rivers Alliance, Birmingham, Alabama and the Southern Environmental Law Center, Atlanta, Georgia. 14 pp.
- Boer, Harry. 1961. Pentecost and Missions. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan.
- Bush, Mark B. 2000. Ecology of a Changing Planet, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey. 498 pp.
- Fishbeck, Thompson, Carr and Huber, Environmental Architects. 2008. Plaster Creek Watershed Management Plan. Fishbeck, Thompson, Carr and Huber, Grand Rapids, Michigan. 86 pp.
- Hall, Douglas John. 1986. Imaging God – Dominion as Stewardship. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan. 248 pp.
- Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. 2002. Total Maximum Load for Biota for Plaster Creek, Kent County, Michigan. Michigan DEQ.
- Wright, N. T. 2008. Surprised by Hope – Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church. HarperCollins Publishers, New York. 332 pp.

## Abstract

In June, 2008, a CCCS-funded workshop entitled, Creation Care in Missions, was held with representatives from Calvin's International Development Studies Program, Christian Reformed World Missions, and Christian Reformed World Relief Committee. Each group developed an action plan to begin implementing creation care principles in all aspects of their organizational life. While the orientation of this workshop was to look outward, at our mission efforts abroad, the project proposed here reverses that orientation to focus directly on the CRC denominational headquarters, as well as four local churches that reside within the much-maligned Plaster Creek watershed. This proposed project will work to develop an action plan for implementing concrete expressions of creation care at the denominational offices, and will produce a strategy for mobilizing the four focus congregations to similarly begin actualizing our shared commitment to creation care. Implementation of creation care activities will emerge from the strategies developed in this workshop and will be carried out by a Project Outreach Coordinator.