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Study guide

For the sake of the earth

By Robert C. Blezard

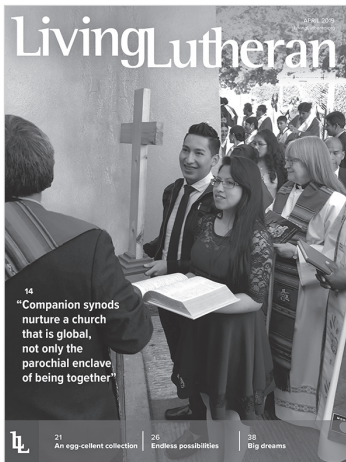
The environmental crisis may be the No. 1 issue facing civilization. If our planet is not habitable, there is no future. Period. Game over. But as the damaging effects of climate change are surfacing with increasing regularity, God's people across the globe are mobilizing to make a difference. Won't you help?

Exercise 1: ELCA policy

"We see the despoiling of the environment as nothing less than the degradation of God's gracious gift of creation." This bold declaration begins the ELCA social statement "Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice." Even in 1993, when the ELCA Churchwide Assembly passed the statement, there were clear signs that the environment was in deep trouble. Drawing heavily from Scripture, the 12-page document has proven prophetic as climate change and other environmental problems have intensified.

It would be worthwhile to closely examine "Care for Creation" (find it at elca.org/socialstatements). For each statement below, discuss what is true, why it's true, what you agree with and what you challenge, and most importantly, what it calls us to do.

- God blesses the world and sees it as "good," even before humankind comes on the scene. All creation, not just humankind, is viewed as "very good" in God's eyes (Genesis 1:31).
- The idea of the earth as a boundless warehouse has proven both false and dangerous.
- Meeting the needs of today's generations for food, clothing and shelter requires a sound environment. Action to counter degradation, especially within this decade, is essential to the future of our children and our children's children.
- Creation must be given voice. We must listen to the people who fish the sea, harvest the forest, till the soil and mine the earth, as well as to those who advance the conservation, protection and preservation of the environment.
- The earth and its fullness belong to the Lord. No person or group has absolute claim to the earth or its products. The principle of sufficiency means meeting the basic needs of all humanity and all creation.
- The principle of sustainability summons our church, in its global work with poor people, to pursue sustainable development strategies. It summons our church to support U.S. farmers who are turning



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to sustainable methods, and to encourage industries to produce sustainably. It summons each of us, in every aspect of our lives, to behave in ways that are consistent with the long-term sustainability of our planet.

Exercise 2: Floods, drought, fires

The world's scientific community has reached a strong consensus that humans are causing our earth to warm rapidly. They warn that the signs of destructive climate change are already apparent:

- In March 2019, Nebraska suffered unprecedented flooding from a “cyclone bomb” storm.
- In 2018, California endured massive wildfires as vegetation, dried from a yearslong drought, ignited and incinerated thousands of homes.
- With Harvey, Maria and Irma, 2017 was the costliest hurricane season on record (\$280 billion in damage) and one of the deadliest (estimated 3,300 perished).
- The world's ice caps and glaciers are melting at an accelerating rate, speeding the warming trend and contributing to a rise in the sea level.
- As sea levels rise, many low-lying islands (such as Shishmaref, Alaska) and coastal areas (such as the city of Miami) are disappearing or experiencing tidal flooding never before seen.

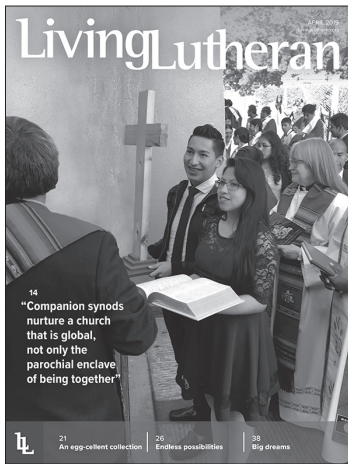
Discuss:

- What other weather- or climate-related catastrophes have you heard about?
- Which ones alarm you the most? Why?
- What are the common threads through all these events?
- How does the globe's warming trend contribute to all these events?

Exercise 3: Close to home

In your study group, share stories, experiences and observations of climate change and how it affects your lives.

- Have you or your community faced unusual floods, drought or storms in recent years? Any climate-related events? How have they affected you or your community?
- How is your physical environment different now from when you were a child? What's different about the vegetation? The animals and insects? The temperature and humidity? The rainfall (or lack of it)? Your use of heat in the winter and cooling in the summer?



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- How has the agriculture changed in your area? Crops that now thrive or fail to thrive? Growing seasons? Planting and harvesting times?

Exercise 4: The distant rumble ...

When you hear a thunderstorm approaching and feel the telltale gusts of wind that precede a downpour, you get busy, right? You shut the windows in the house and make sure the car windows are rolled up. You take the cushions off the deck furniture and remove items that shouldn't get wet.

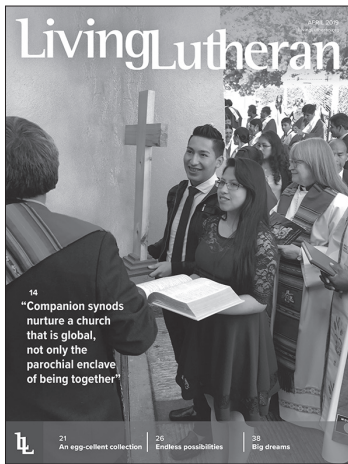
Climate change has been "rumbling in the distance" for several decades, and the thunder is getting louder. Scientists tell us that our current generation may be facing the "now or never" moment to turn around climate change.

- What "rumbling in the distance" have you heard about climate change? How long have you heard it?
- How has that rumbling gotten louder as the years have gone by?
- What have you thought over the years as you've heard the rumbling getting louder? What do you feel?
- Concerning the environment, what worries you the most?
- How can you be part of the solution? How can your church?
- If there were an effort to help raise awareness about climate change and environmental issues, would you join it? Would you lead it?

Exercise 5: Form a "Green Team"

Many congregations are forming "Green Teams" to help educate God's people about the environmental crises facing our world and lead by example in ways we can help as individuals and communities. How would you go about forming a "Green Team"? How could it help your congregation advance creation care awareness in the following areas?

- Update or add insulation, caulking and weather-stripping.
- Switch to LED and compact fluorescent lighting.
- Update to energy-efficient heating and air conditioning.
- Recycle glass, plastic and fiber.
- Reduce consumption of plastics.
- Encourage walking, bicycling and use of energy-efficient transportation.
- Educate about pollution and climate change.
- Study the biblical and theological underpinnings of creation care.



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- Plan worship to celebrate creation.
- Expand green space and planting.
- Advocate for public policies that promote environmental conservation.

For further information

There's a lot of information on the internet about climate change and the environmental crisis. Here are some places where you and your congregation can find facts:

- **The 2018 National Climate Assessment (nca2018.globalchange.gov):** This comprehensive report by 13 U.S. federal agencies summarizes the environmental crisis and its impact, current and future, on the United States. Sobering reading.
- **The United Nations (un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/climate-change):** Chiefly through the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the U.N. has assembled scientists and world leaders to study and address the challenges. Their reports and assessments provide solid, unbiased, authoritative information.
- **NASA (climate.nasa.gov):** With its fleet of satellites and powerful capability for analysis, NASA has monitored changes in climate and environment.

For education and action

Churches have been working hard to provide study materials to help God's people understand the environmental crisis and our charge to care for the planet.

- **“Awakening to God’s Call to Earthkeeping”:** The ELCA’s 50-page resource outlines four comprehensive workshop sessions to explore the environment. It also has a bibliography, list of web resources, sample documents and more. Free for PDF download: elca.org/resources/caring-for-creation.
- **“Hunger and Climate Change”:** Climate change is hurting the ability of people around the world to feed themselves. Through snapshot stories, photos and facts, this informative eight-page resource from the ELCA Washington Office and ELCA World Hunger explains how. Free at elca.org/resources/caring-for-creation.
- **“Every Creature Singing”:** From the Mennonite Creation Care Network, here is a wonderful study resource that looks at biblical, theological and ethical concerns about the environment. The web-based resource provides an in-depth curriculum in 12 study sessions. Go to mennocreationcare.org/every-creature-singing.

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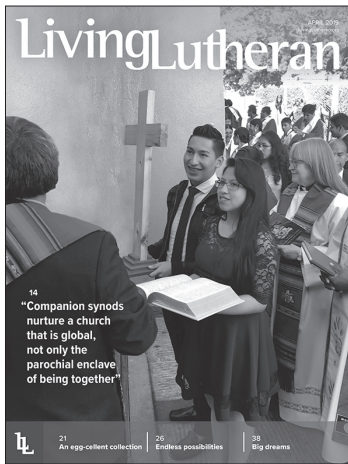
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- **Lutherans Restoring Creation:** For more than 20 years this grassroots group of theologians, scientists and other concerned people of faith have been working to educate and equip God's people to meet the growing environmental challenges. Good resources for worship, study and action can be found at lutheransrestoringcreation.org.
- **Blessed Tomorrow:** The ELCA has joined ecoAmerica's Blessed Tomorrow program as one of its many ecumenical partners. People of faith can find inspirational information on how to respond as God's people to the environmental crisis. Lots of good resources at blessedtomorrow.org.
- **"Let's Talk Faith & Climate: Communication Guidance for Faith Leaders":** Don't know what to say about the environment? This practical 20-page guide from the ELCA and ecoAmerica's Blessed Tomorrow program can help. Find it at bit.ly/ELCALetsTalkFaith.

For the sake of the earth

By Cindy Uken



Photos: Courtesy of ELCA Advocacy

Ruth Ivory-Moore (left), ELCA program director for environment and corporate responsibility, discusses climate change issues with a colleague during the United Nations climate conference.

While talking about the uptick in severe weather and extreme temperatures, Ruth Ivory-Moore, ELCA program director for environment and corporate responsibility, is direct: “All of creation is experiencing the impact of global warming.

“These extreme weather patterns result in unprecedented floods, droughts and wildfires, and rising sea levels that are leading to the degradation of the earth. And the consequences are not being borne equally. The most vulnerable among us are paying a higher price; that is, they are disproportionately impacted with extraordinary losses and damages. We are truly in a dire situation, but there is hope—both spiritually and scientifically.”

Against this backdrop, the ELCA is underscoring its work in environmental justice through a new collaboration with ecoAmerica’s Blessed Tomorrow program, an ecumenical faith community initiative to empower climate action and advocacy.

“The earth is our home and we are accountable to God for protecting and caring for all of creation,” Ivory-Moore said. “We recognize and value the benefits of establishing relationships and working with other denominations. Therefore, the ELCA embraces the opportunity to form

collaborative relationships with others to work to protect our home—the Earth.

The nonprofit ecoAmerica conducts research to learn who is ready to advocate on the issue of climate change and how organizations involved in that work can motivate people to take action.

“We can use this information to bring awareness to our congregations in language that resonates to their specific concerns,” Ivory-Moore said.

Amy Reumann, director of ELCA Advocacy, said that the relationship with ecoAmerica expands and deepens the ELCA’s ability to provide resources that inform, inspire and equip congregations and leaders to learn about climate change, talk about its impacts and address it through their ministries.

“Climate change is hurting people now and impacting core ministries of the church,” she said. “It’s uprooting populations, undermining global gains in health, exacerbating hunger, and driving natural disasters and regional conflicts. We are involved for the sake of our neighbor’s well-being and the security of generations to come.

“It’s also a theological problem, rooted in distortion of our relationship with God that results in treating creation as an endless storehouse to plunder rather than a precious trust to steward. Climate change is the result of human sinfulness,



Youth at the 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering visited the advocacy display and were encouraged to be agents of change for climate solutions.

as we in the U.S. consume more than our fair share of natural resources through unsustainable lifestyles and energy use while those who contribute least to greenhouse gas emissions are suffering its impacts the most.”

Ivory-Moore said the church’s work in environmental advocacy is based on Scripture and ELCA teachings, including the social statements “Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice” and “Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All” (elca.org/socialstatements).


“Our climate-justice work includes advocating for public laws and policies that protect the health and well-being of humans and all of life,” she said.

Ann Svennungsen, bishop of the Minneapolis Area Synod, said Martin Luther’s concept of vocation is key to understanding the church’s call to address climate change.

“Because Luther was so clear on justification by faith alone, he spoke courageously about our freedom to boldly engage the world,” Svennungsen said. “He always seemed to be pushing Christians back into the community. If your town needs a mayor, run for mayor. If it needs a school, build a school. These are the vocations of the baptized. Today, Luther would probably add: If your global home needs healing, find a way to do it.”

Ivory-Moore said ELCA Advocacy works to create resources and opportunities to get involved, including action alerts so Lutherans can send messages to their members of Congress.

ELCA Advocacy works with not only full-communion partners but also interreligious offices on Capitol Hill so the faith community speaks with one voice in the most strategic way.

“The Blessed Tomorrow program is another area where we can collaborate and work with our full-communion partner churches,” Ivory-Moore said. “Blessed Tomorrow provides another venue to collectively raise our voices for action. We can share ideas and tools, and help build compelling strategies to address climate change and to protect and uplift the most vulnerable.” 

To learn more, go to elca.org/environment. Download a study guide at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



Cindy Uken is a reporter based in Palm Springs, Calif. She has worked at *USA Today*, as well as newspapers in South Dakota, Minnesota, Montana and California.