

Christian Education Programs & Environmental Education Final Report and Findings

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Introduction

Although the faith community has a strong environmental ethic inherent in all the major religious traditions, particularly in the area of environmental and social justice, the focus of the faith community's work on environmental issues has been on adult advocacy and civic engagement. This has built capacity within a segment of the faith community but has left out intentional outreach to children and youth. Various environmental education materials and programs have been developed for the faith community but these efforts have lacked a comprehensive environmental education focus with children (K-12) in either formal or nonformal religious settings. As environmental values continue to evolve in faith communities, an opportunity exists to provide environmental education through religious educational programs such as Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, and summer residential camps hosted by congregations and camp and conference centers.

Although there is an interest in environmental issues from a faith perspective within the religious community and there exist multiple avenues for incorporating environmental education into existing children's educational programming, current programs are not designed to integrate environmental education. The goal of this project in partnership with EECapacity is to draw upon the secular environmental education's successes and examine the potential integration of environmental issues and environmental education practices into existing religious educational programs.

Scope of Work Summary

Various environmental education materials and programs have been developed for the faith community but these efforts have lacked a comprehensive environmental education focus with children. This project focused on identifying existing educational resources and conducting a needs assessment of the religious community with various stakeholders regarding children's religious environmental education. Additionally, the project outlined how religious education occurs in the K-12 setting, and developed recommendations for initial or further integration into K-12 religious education.

Both interviews with stakeholders and an informal survey with faith-based activists and leaders were utilized to gather information for the needs assessment. After conducting an initial needs assessment with stakeholders, a draft set of guidelines for incorporating environmental

education into existing religious education curricula was developed. Initial feedback on the guidelines was solicited from clergy and laity who utilize environmental education in their existing religious education programming. In addition to a needs assessment and draft guideline development, a pilot training webinar was held in order to educate clergy, laity, and religious staff on how to incorporate environmental education into existing religious education programming. The ultimate goal of the project is to foster the creation of guidelines and to facilitate the integration of environmental education into existing children's religious education programs.

Methods

By utilizing stakeholder surveys, interviews, and web-based research, this project was able to conduct a needs assessment and discover valuable avenues for incorporating environmental education into existing religious education programs. Early on, the project identified that the largest, most active and organized faith community in regard to religious education was the mainline Protestant community. This community has a more developed and extensive network of religious educators and a more developed institutional structure. Given limited resources for research, the project focused its initial inquiry with this segment of the faith community.

Stakeholder interviews: The project identified 8 types of stakeholders to interview. These stakeholders represented the various aspects of religious life involved in religious education: institutional religious education staff/leadership, institutional environmental programming staff, environmental para-church staff/leadership, clergy, religious education teachers, Christian education directors, camp and conference center staff/leadership, and religious education curriculum developers. In total 10 people were contacted for information and interviews within a two-month period: 1. Disciples of Christ clergy; 2. United Methodist Church worship specialist; 3. United Methodist Church religious education staff; 4. National Council of Churches Committee on Outdoor Ministry member; 5. Executive Director of a faith-based regional interfaith non-profit (para-church group); 6. Presbyterian Church USA environmental program staff; 7. United Methodist Church camp and conference center staff; 8. Volunteer Sunday School Teacher; 9. Former Christian education director; and 10. Religious education curriculum developer.

Web-based information gathering: The project used web-based searches to help identify existing curricula, obtain information on religious education programming and curricula, and identify institutional structures available for training and curricula dissemination. This online information gathering was conducted over a four month period.

Survey of clergy and laity: The project developed a survey instrument that asked respondents if they incorporated environmental education into their existing programs, how they viewed existing environmental education materials, and what barriers, if any, they experienced to incorporating environmental education into existing religious education programs. The survey was administered online and was sent to a non-random group of faith-based clergy, leadership, and laity.

Identified Objectives

The following objectives were outlined in the Scope of Work and were used to gauge progress on the project.

- Identify existing religious environmental education materials for children
- Make recommendations for incorporating environmental education into existing and developed religious curricula
- Conduct an assessment to determine the extent to which additional curricula should be developed and also identify mechanisms for religious educator training through interviews and surveys with key stakeholders
- Through a webinar and symposium gathering of religious educators and key stakeholders, outline best practices and guidelines to be used in developing environmental education programs for congregations, denominations, and residential camps

Measurable Results

The following results were achieved over the course of the six month project.

- Identified existing religious environmental education materials for children
More than 70 existing religious environmental education materials for children were identified. These resources varied in their target audience age and purpose (youth groups, Sunday school programs, vacation Bible school, and church camps). Of the resources identified, only one-third were produced within the last decade. The rest were produced in the 80s and 90s.
- Identified select group of stakeholders for interviews and conducted interviews
Interviews were conducted with various stakeholders (clergy, religious education institutional staff, religious education curriculum writers, camp center leaders, Christian education directors, and Sunday school leaders). These interviews aimed to uncover barriers and opportunities for incorporating environmental education.
- Developed and disseminated brief survey with various stakeholders
To augment the interviews conducted with stakeholders, a brief online survey was developed and sent to two different audiences: camp and conference center professionals and lay and religious leaders. The goal of the survey was to determine to what extent respondents' programs/organizations incorporate environmental education into their religious education programs, to identify those types of programs where environmental education is incorporated, identify barriers to incorporating environmental education, and obtain feedback on the draft religious education guidelines for excellence.

- Developed draft curriculum guidelines for excellence
Adapted from the North American Association for Environmental Education's Guidelines for Excellence, religious education guidelines were developed and initial online feedback was sought from stakeholders.
- Created and conducted webinar
A webinar was developed to reach camp and conference center staff, religious education practitioners, and clergy in order to provide an introduction for incorporating environmental education into existing religious education programs. The webinar, done in partnership with Creation Justice Ministries (the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program spin off) was held November 20 and featured a camp program that has integrated environmental education into their program as well as tips for integration in religious education. More than 75 people registered for the webinar.
- Developed recommendations for incorporating environmental education
Through web-based information gathering, interviews and the survey instrument, the project was able to determine best "next steps" for incorporating environmental education into existing religious education programming/curricula. The initial recommendations were articulated to EECapacity through the interim report. Final recommendations are encompassed in the final report.

Summary of Curriculum Review

More than 70 existing religious environmental education curricula for children were identified through inquiry with stakeholders and web-based information searches. Target audiences and designated venues (Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, youth groups, etc.) varied. Quality of the curriculum also varied. Some curriculum rated high on usability, visual appeal and professional tenor. Some curriculum, however, were created as word documents with no visual appeal and with a low rated usability. Of the curricula surveyed, an overwhelming majority were published prior to 2003, with only 33 percent being published in the last decade. Most curricula identified were not denominationally specific and instead had an ecumenical or interfaith approach. There were also relatively few Vacation Bible School and Youth Group curricula developed (6 percent and 4 percent respectively). Even though there were very few formal camp and conference center curricula of the overall resources surveyed (9 percent), the curricula that have been developed was more recent, had a good usability rating and included a comprehensive, integrated approach. Also, the camp and conference center curriculum that was developed by the National Council of Churches Committee on Outdoor Ministries, which includes the institutional staff from a broad range of denominations, was promoted ecumenically. This curriculum was mentioned several times by stakeholders in interviews as being well received. In summary, based on availability, opportunities exist to create curricular resources in both Vacation Bible School and youth group settings.

Curriculum Review

<i>Qty.</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
3	denominational specific resources	4%
4	vacation Bible school curriculum	6%
6	camp and conference center curriculum	9%
3	youth group curricula	4%
10	preschool appropriate curricula	14%
27	published before 2000	39%
23	published in the last decade	33%

Summary of Stakeholder Interviews

Interviews were conducted with various religious education stakeholders across a wide range of disciplines and included: Disciples of Christ clergy, General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church curriculum developer and worship specialist staff, religious camp/conference center staff, Sunday school teacher, Presbyterian church institutional staff, former Christian education director, faith-based environmental NGO executive director, and a member of the National Council of Churches Committee on Outdoor Ministry. These interviews were conducted September – November 2013 and aimed to uncover barriers and opportunities for incorporating environmental education as well as identify any existing faith-based environmental educational materials.

Interview questions included:

1. What barriers do you or your program experience in incorporating Creation care?
2. Can you describe how Creation care education is done in your community/institution?
3. What opportunities do you see for new resources or programming?
4. How often do you see Creation care education incorporated into children’s religious education?
5. Who influences what curriculum or resources that are used?

Interview Summary

Resource Needs: Those interviewed all stated that there were very few faith-based environmental education resources designed for children’s religious education, although all agreed that the ethic for caring for Creation was firmly rooted in their institutions/churches. Several of those interviewed stated that curriculum was often chosen by either the Christian Education director or volunteer teacher. Those who had a direct role in implementing children’s religious education programming cited the primary need was for resources to be user-friendly for teachers (a majority of which are untrained volunteers) and that materials needed to be available to use “off the shelf” with no training.

Training: Although some interviewees identified a desire for additional teacher training, many recognized that the ability to provide training opportunities for volunteer teachers rested solely

on whether or not a church was large enough to hire a Christian Education director and how much emphasis that director put on teacher training.

Barriers: Interviewees identified several barriers, including: lack of user-friendly curriculum, lack of teacher training, having access only to materials that presented environmental issues in a preaching or partisan manner, and not knowing how to fit environmental education into existing and established religious education programming.

Opportunities: Several opportunities for incorporating Creation care into existing religious education programming were identified by those interviewed, including: 1. creating short, select modules that could be used during summer sessions or during environmentally focused time periods (like the Season of Creation or Earth Day Sunday); 2. creating Vacation bible school curricula with environmental education as a theme; 3. creating prayer resources to be used in existing religious education curricula; and 4. creating resource materials that make connections to social justice. Of note, every person interviewed identified creating new Vacation Bible School curricula as a prime opportunity. In addition, those who worked at an institutional level, indicated that newly created faith-based environmental education materials would be ripe for institutional promotion since many of the religious denominations (such as the mainline Protestants) already have a stated environmental ethic. Those institutional staff interviewed indicated that newly created Creation care curriculum and its promotion by the various institutions could dovetail with existing environmental work such as greening church buildings, which is already being conducted at many congregations and denominations.

Survey Result Summary

The online survey, administered in November 2013, was sent through an email solicitation in order to capture a broad range of participants (clergy, religious leaders, laity, and faith-based environmental professionals). The list, maintained by Creation Justice Ministries, an Orthodox/Protestant nonprofit organization formerly a part of the National Council of Churches, included primarily Protestant members but also included some Jewish and Catholic individuals. Thirty-seven people responded to the survey. The response rate was low (less than 1 percent) and can be attributed to the mass email solicitation that was performed. In all of the questions, the terminology “creation care education” was used instead of “environmental education,” since this terminology has better resonance with the faith community.

Of those who responded to the survey, a large majority (84 percent) incorporated Creation care education into their children’s religious education program. Of those 84 percent, more than half utilized Creation care education in their Sunday school programs (53 percent) and summer camps (59 percent). Only 29 percent and 22 percent incorporated Creation care into their Youth Group and Vacation Bible School programs (respectively). Approximately a third (32 percent) incorporated Creation care into special children’s events.

Less than a fifth of those responding always had Creation care programming in their religious education. Instead 32 percent reported Creation care programming as occurring “often” and 38 percent “occasionally.”

Of those that incorporated Creation care into their children's religious education programs, only 14 percent found it "easy" to incorporate. Almost half (46 percent) reported that it was "somewhat" easy to incorporate Creation care, with 19 percent saying it was relatively easy. Of note, 16 percent reported that they did not know.

Of those that incorporated Creation care into their children's religious education programs, 5 percent rated the curriculum materials as "excellent." Thirty-five rated the curriculum they used as "very good" and 16 and 19 percent rated the curriculum they used as "good" and "fair" (respectively). Of note, 24 percent replied "don't know" when asked to rate the curriculum that was used.

Of those that incorporated Creation care into their children's religious education programming, less than half (26 percent) experienced barriers with 58 percent reporting that they did not experience any barriers. Barriers experienced included: lack of training (56 percent), lack of resources (44 percent), other priorities (44 percent) and lack of time (33 percent). The respondents were evenly split on whether or not they had received any training with 47 percent reporting that they had not received training and 47 percent reporting that they had received training.

Overall, those responding to the survey were able to find adequate materials somewhat easily for use in their children's religious education programming with most Creation care education occurring in traditional Sunday School programs on an occasional or often basis. Lack of training was the barrier identified by a majority of respondents, with about half of respondents receiving training. Additional research is needed to determine the barriers and needs for those who have not yet incorporated Creation care education into their children's religious education programs.

Survey Questions

1. Do you currently incorporate Creation Care education in your children's education programs?
2. If yes, please check all the areas where you incorporate Creation Care education:
 - a. Vacation Bible School
 - b. Sunday School
 - c. Youth group
 - d. Special children events
3. How often is Creation Care utilized in Christian education
4. Often occasionally seldom never don't know
5. Did you find Creation Care education materials readily available?
6. How would you rate the Creation Care education materials that you used?
7. Did you experience any barriers to providing Creation Care education in your community?
8. If yes, please specify:
 - a. Lack of faith-based resources

- b. Lack of training on how to incorporate environmental education into a faith context
 - c. Lack of time
 - d. Other priorities took precedence
9. Have you ever adapted secular environmental education resources to use in your faith community?
10. Have you received training in Creation Care, faith-based or secular environmental education?

Suggested Guidelines for Religious Curricula

These guidelines were developed after initial consultation with stakeholders and draw upon the guidelines developed by the North American Association for Environmental Education. These draft guidelines were presented to clergy and laity in the faith-based environmental movement for initial feedback. Feedback was generated by an online survey that asked respondents to rate the importance of each guideline using a Likert scale. In the survey, 70-84 percent of respondents rated all guidelines except “Depth” as being very important to include in any religious education addressing environmental education. Only 31 percent of respondents rated “Depth” as being very important to include in curricula, with 67 percent of respondents rating “Depth” as being somewhat important.

Additional feedback in the form of a more comprehensive survey and interviews with stakeholders and religious education leaders would need to be conducted before finalizing a draft set of guidelines for use in developing environmental religious education curricular resources.

Draft Guidelines

1. Fairness and accuracy: materials should be fair and accurate in describing environmental problems, issues, and conditions, and in reflecting the diversity of perspectives on them.
2. Depth: materials should foster awareness of God’s Creation and its value, cultivate a connection to God’s Creation, and present a theological understanding of Creation
3. Faith-Building: materials should help cultivate personal faith and discipleship
4. Action orientation: materials should promote Creation stewardship responsibility and encourage learners to use their knowledge, skills, and faith as a basis for action.
5. Instructional Soundness: materials should rely on instructional techniques that create an effective learning environment
6. Usability: materials should be well designed and easy to use.

Survey Results

	Very important –	Somewhat important –	Not really important –	Not important –	Total –	Average Rating –
Fairness and Accuracy	83.78% 31	13.51% 5	0% 0	2.70% 1	37	1.22
Depth	30.56% 11	66.67% 24	0% 0	2.78% 1	36	1.75
Builds One's Faith	72.97% 27	24.32% 9	0% 0	2.70% 1	37	1.32
Action Oriented	81.08% 30	16.22% 6	0% 0	2.70% 1	37	1.24
Creates Effective Learning Environment	70.27% 26	24.32% 9	2.70% 1	2.70% 1	37	1.38
Usability	82.86% 29	14.29% 5	0% 0	2.86% 1	35	1.23

Summary of Findings

Protestants and Catholics typically deliver their religious education on Sunday mornings in one-hour blocks while Jewish congregations hold multi-hour block classes for children on Saturdays. In addition to these more formal settings, numerous religious summer camps for children provide nonformal educational opportunities. These summer camps are typically in one or two week segments and are set in “natural” surroundings with large acreage. Also popular are religious day camps (e.g., Vacation Bible School) that are typically held for one week in the evenings at a congregation. All of these types of religious education programming provide avenues for incorporating environmental education.

Although there is an interest in environmental issues from a faith perspective within the religious community and multiple avenues exist for incorporating environmental education into existing children’s religious educational programming, current programs are not designed to integrate environmental education. After 20-30 years of raising the awareness of environmental stewardship within the religious community, the denominational culture is primed for integrating environmental education into church-based education, particularly with mainline Protestant and Jewish denominations and congregations who have developed church environmental policy statements or programs.

Curricular Resources: Few current environmental educational curricula or curricula that take up, in part, environmental themes or concepts, exist. For instance, less than five Vacation Bible School (VBS) curriculum could be found. Of non-environmentally focused curriculum, few, if any, integrated any environmental education or environmental stewardship concepts. Additionally, several VBS curricula identified focused on animals but did not include caring for God’s Creation in the educational message or activities.

Curricular resource providers include independent publishers and religious denominational press, with the greatest opportunity for incorporating environmental education

with denominational press. Decisions regarding curriculum development and promotion often rest with a few select people within an institution and their corresponding publishing house.

Vacation Bible School (VBS) was identified by stakeholders as having the greatest potential for incorporating environmental education. In surveying available curriculum very few VBS curriculum that utilized environmental education exist. Additionally, less than 25 percent of survey respondents reported that they incorporated environmental education into their VBS programming. Stakeholders also repeatedly stated that usability (ability to use the resource “off the shelf” with no training) was a priority given the lack of teacher training conducted.

Overall, those responding to the survey were able to find adequate materials somewhat easily for use in their children’s religious education programming with most Creation care education occurring in traditional Sunday School programs on an occasional or often basis.

Training: Very few training opportunities for religious educators/directors are available and most curricula users select curriculum requiring no training for staff or volunteers. Lack of training was the barrier identified by a majority of survey respondents, with about half of respondents receiving training.

Recommendations for Advancing Environmental Education within Children’s Religious Education

Below is a list of recommendations for further actions that could be taken to increase the quantity and quality of environmental education that is conducted within children’s religious education programs.

- A. Guidelines for Excellence: Develop a final set of Guidelines for Excellence based on the Guidelines developed by the North American Association of Environmental Educators. The guidelines could be used to not only evaluate existing curricula but to make the case for additional resources if there are not enough faith-based resources available that meet the guidelines. In order to finalize a set of guidelines for excellence, feedback from additional stakeholders will need to be conducted and a sponsoring body, like the Christian Education Association, will need to be identified in order to institute the guidelines.
- B. Incorporation into Existing Materials: One recommendation is to utilize relationships with major religious institutions such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the United Methodist Church to capitalize on the small number of decision makers in those institutions. The goal would be to conduct outreach to institutional and publishing staff and encourage them to incorporate environmental education into their existing curricula. This outreach could be done with one-on-one meetings and/or through institutional briefings with their staff. In addition, a forum could be held with multiple denominational staff and provide information and training on how to incorporate environmental education into existing curriculum/programming.
- C. Curriculum Development: Two program opportunities were repeatedly identified during stakeholder interviews: Vacation Bible School and a mini- or one-day summer session

curriculum. One recommendation would be to work with environmental educational professionals in order to develop a VBS curriculum and/or mini-session curriculum. This should be done in cooperation with existing religious institutions in order to assure effective promotion and adoption by religious denominations. Any curriculum developed should focus extensively on usability and user-friendly formats to offset training deficits.

- D. Training: Incorporating environmental education into existing programs or using environmentally focused curriculum is a new concept in the religious education realm and thus training of existing practitioners is recommended. One recommendation is to develop a web-based training pilot program for select religious education directors and camp directors/staff.
- E. Potential Partnerships: The secular environmental education community has a great deal to offer the religious education community in terms of expertise and resources. Potential partners could be the North American Association for Environmental Education, with its expertise in professional development/training, Project Learning Tree and Project Wild, with their activity ideas and curriculum, and other environmental non-profit organizations such as the Audubon Society, World Wildlife Fund, and the National Wildlife Foundation, who have shown an interest in faith-based outreach and have developed some children's environmental education resources.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the EPA funding for the National Environmental Education Training Program (EECapacity), which helped support this project.

Appendix

Draft Guidelines

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- **Instructional Soundness:** materials should rely on instructional techniques that create an effective learning environment
- **Usability:** materials should be well designed and easy to use.