

Green Faith: Training Religious Leaders for Environmental Leadership

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I am a *GreenFaith Fellow*. I am finding it a unique opportunity to live out my vocation as a minister of Word and Sacrament for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This fellowship program, which is receiving national recognition, is the first comprehensive education and training program in the United States to prepare lay and ordained leaders from interfaith religious traditions for religiously-based environmental leadership.

There are twenty fellows in each cohort. We represent over ten religious denominations, including Roman Catholic; mainline Protestant; historically black churches; and Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist Jewish. We work in a wide variety of settings, including congregations, universities, campus ministries, NGOs, and denominational organizations. Additionally, we take part in three three-day residential sessions in ecologically varied settings—urban, rural, and suburban. Over the course of the eighteenth month program, we receive extensive education and training in eco-theology, “greening” the operation of institutions, environmental advocacy, and environmental justice. We take part in monthly conference calls, and build relationships with environmental leaders in their region. Each of us will carry out a leadership project in our community, mobilizing religious leaders in relation to an environmental issue. Upon graduating, we will join the Fellowship’s alumni/ae network and mentor other emerging leaders in this field.

Rabbi Lawrence Troster, the GreenFaith Fellowship Program Director, is a nationally recognized religious environmental leader. He has worked with the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL), the Jewish Theological Seminary, Bard College, and as a rabbi of congregations in Toronto and New Jersey. GreenFaith’s Executive Director, Rev. Fletcher Harper, also offers leadership for the fellowship program.

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Even before becoming a GreenFaith Fellow I was able to discern an intimate relationship between human beings and the rest of nature. In fact, as I reflect on my entire life I realize that I am most content when connecting in some immediate way with the natural world around me. From an early age I noticed the hand of God within the pulsations of the natural blooming and dying cycles of all of life.

My interest in ecology as a theological concern began while reading Teilhard de Chardin as an undergraduate at Vanderbilt University. Twenty years later—back at Vanderbilt as a doctoral student—I found my ecological passions nourished through a “Theology of Nature” course with Sallie McFague. During my theological studies I learned a variety of different ways to interpret the connection between faith and nature, mostly from the Protestant Reformed tradition but from other perspectives as well. In recent years I’ve had opportunities to teach eco-spirituality courses to undergraduates at Bellarmine University and to seminary students in the Master of Arts in Spirituality program jointly sponsored by Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and Bellarmine University. I enjoy encouraging students not to make the traditional separation between “nature” and “spirit,” where the spirit resides in human life alone and sets us apart from and above the rest of creation. My

approach rather is to view creation as filled with God’s life-giving Holy Spirit in a mysterious way. The human relationship to the natural environment is not one of stewardship as much as it is a fellowship or communion with the triune God in God’s compassionate love for all creation.

Participation in the GreenFaith Fellowship Program is continuing to broaden my understanding of the meaning of God’s will for the flourishing of all creation and has enhanced access to knowledge about environmental issues from other faith traditions as well as from the social sciences.

GreenFaith’s advisory committee offers strong support and includes nationally recognized religious and environmental leaders, including Drs. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, co-directors of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University. A statement issued from the advisory committee reports, “There is a dearth of religious leaders in the United States who are speaking out regarding key environmental issues. This interfaith effort is indispensable.”

Dr. Larry Rasmussen, Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, said “The GreenFaith Fellowship Program meets a palpable need for a select group at a critical time. I applaud the substance and details of the program— if it didn’t exist, we would need to invent it.”