



Following Jesus,



All the way down to the dirt.



A ROCHA
30 years caring for creation

You Are Here

Look around your community and ask yourself one question: what if there was no Christian presence here? Obviously, the churches would be gone, along with worship services and Sunday School classes. But so too, would be several schools. Habitat for Humanity would be missing. As might the food pantry and homeless shelter, the clinic and hospital, the pregnancy center and adoption service. What about the counseling center? Or hospice? Not to mention day care and senior care programs? Yes, taking the Christian presence out of a community would leave huge holes, not just in the so-called “safety net” that cares for those in need, but also in the very life and wellbeing of the community—the relationships fostered and the blessings to both those who are served as well as those who serve. And of course, there would be no Gospel witness—in word or deed.

Sadly, just such a hole exists in most communities today—a hole left by Christians failing to fully embrace the biblical mandate to care for God’s creation.

As God’s people, we are to lovingly steward ALL that God created—human and non human alike.

And since there’s no better place to do that than right where you live, and no better time to do it than right now, A Rocha wants to help you get started—right where you live, right now!

In celebration of its 30th Anniversary, A Rocha is launching its You Are Here campaign and encouraging people all across the country to actively engage in caring for God’s wondrous yet beleaguered creation right in their own community—in small, easy to take steps. To help, we’re pleased to share the following excerpt from the forthcoming book, *You Are Here: following Jesus, all the way down to the dirt*, along with some tips on how to do that where you are.

So, read up and roll out. Show you care. Start something. In your community. Now. Because YOU ARE HERE.



A ROCHA

Christians in Conservation

[ah-RAW-sha] - noun 1. Portuguese. the rock 2. an international family of conservation organizations working to show God's love for all creation through community-based conservation projects and educational programs 3. an expanding network of projects in the USA 4. a story of hope, transformation and restoration 5. waiting to welcome and help you at www.arocho-usa.org.

You Are Here

Following Jesus, all the way down to the dirt

The following is an excerpt from the forthcoming book by Rev. Robert Campbell, Senior Pastor of Santa Margarita Community Church, Santa Margarita, California and A Rocha USA Board member.

As a pastor, I want you to be thoroughly Christian...all the way down to the dirt. What does that mean? It means that my desire is for you to be as God created you to be: whole and wholly connected--to God certainly, but also to the place (with all its human and nonhuman inhabitants) God has sent you. Though many in the church have sadly forgotten it, God intends a whole-life, whole-person, whole-place kind of Christianity for you. One that lives on Earth as much as in Heaven. One that takes care of this creation even as it awaits the new creation. In fact, it is in part through you that God is redeeming the creation, making it new.

But “the world” is a big place. And I have trouble just finding my way around the rural areas that make up my parish on the Central Coast of California. *Where does Route 229 lead again? Will that dirt road over Pine Mountain really lead me to Pozo?* To even think about the mission of God *in the world* can be overwhelming. And it isn’t just the scale; it’s the scope. Preaching the gospel. Feeding the poor. Looking after orphans and widows. The needs are endless. To add caring for creation makes it all but impossible - we may as well give up. We have only so much time, energy and money. Besides, what difference can our little actions make? And even if they can make a difference, which actions do we take?

Let me make it worse for a moment.

- 60 percent of “ecosystem services”, which provide our food, water and air have been seriously degraded or are being used unsustainably.¹
- Some 17,000 plant and animal species are currently threatened with extinction--including one in eight birds, one in four mammals, one in five invertebrates, one in three amphibians and half of all turtle species. The current rate of extinction is thousands of times faster than the “normal” or “background” rate.²

1 United Nations. Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. 2005

2 Smithsonian Institution. “Extinction Rates Are Biased And Much Worse Than You Thought.” Smart News. 3 Sept. 2012. <http://blogs.smithsonianmag.com/smartnews/2012/09/extinction-rates-are-biased-and-much-worse-than-you-thought/>. Web. 2 Jan. 2013.

- Pollution causes some 40 percent of deaths worldwide.³

I get it. We feel paralyzed.

But, what if we, as local churches on the mission of God in the world, focused first on the dirt we walk on—the place where we live, work, worship and play? The place God put us. The local church is, after all, God’s way of getting His people in the right place for the job. You were sent by God as missionaries to a place and all its inhabitants—human and nonhuman. You are placed. You, church, are a local gathering of believers. You are defined both by your faith in Jesus and the dirt you walk on. Do you remember Paul’s opening line in 1 Corinthians: “To the church of God *which is at Corinth?*” Or how about to the churches of Galatia or Thessalonica or Laodocia or...you get the point. The place matters tremendously.

Eugene Peterson writes of Christians as placed people in his book *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*:

Everything that the creator God does in forming us as humans is done in place. It follows from this that since we are his creatures and can hardly escape the conditions of our making, for us everything that has to do with God is also in place. All living is local; this land, this neighborhood, these trees and streets and houses, this work, these people.

This may seem so obvious that it doesn’t need saying. But I have spent an adult lifetime with the assigned task of guiding men and women in living out the Christian faith where they raise their children and work for a living, go fishing and play golf, go to bed and eat their meals, and I know that cultivating a sense of place as the exclusive and irreplaceable setting for following Jesus is mighty difficult.

It is *mighty* difficult.

You as a church are people that have a place. This is the supernatural reality of the local church. God arrives in that place through your life and ministry. God has given you to that place and He has given that place to you. It is a beautiful exchange of gifts. The place gets you and you get the place. That place is to reflect Him more fully when you leave than it did when you arrived.

³ Cornell University. “Pollution Causes 40 Percent Of Deaths Worldwide, Study Finds.” ScienceDaily, 14 Aug. 2007. Web. 2 Jan. 2013.

God's people in God's place

God has always combined people and place. In Genesis 1 and 2 God creates man, male and female, and places them in a garden. The garden was a place; it had a name, it was a real place. It was memorable for its gold and precious stones and was bound by the flow of four named rivers. He put the man and woman there to *work* it or to *cultivate* it, or more literally, to *serve* it. God put in the seeds and Adam and Eve were supposed to work to bring the flowers. There would be more glory in the garden because Adam and Eve were in it. The same is true for us. When we walk away from the place we are living, there should be more glory, more beauty, more good than when we arrived.

We see in Genesis 12 that God chooses Abram and brings him to a place where he and his descendants will be the sources of blessing to all the people of the world. God's people and God's place go together.

In Psalm 104, the author sings about the greatness of God's act of creation. God separates the waters in order to form a place. The Psalmist then describes the divine interconnection that happens between the people and the place. God channels the water to cause grass to grow, grass feeds the cows and man eats the cows. It becomes this happy, ingenious cycle of people and place as God intended. In the same Psalm, God waters the grapes, grapes become wine and wine makes man's heart glad and ends with us, the readers, joining in the song of creation. God has always put people and place together.

Paul, in giving his definitive sermon on Mars Hill, explains how the Divine Will has both determined our appointed times and the boundaries of our habitation.

All the way at the far end of the Bible, in Revelation chapter 21, God creates a new heaven and a new earth. That is, a new place for his new people. God's people are never without a place.

These are just a few examples, but enough to see that God has sent YOU to a people with the Gospel message AND to a place as stewards, as servants, acting toward that place as God would act. You can't separate the two, people and place always go together; church and local always go together. Together is whole. Sin has broken Heaven and Earth apart, but God is putting them back together in Jesus. Until the day when it is final, creation groans for you to be whole, the dirt longs for your cultivation.

Your place

It all starts with you knowing the place where God has sent you.

The community I live in participates in the A Rocha Nature Care

Camp program where we teach the children these very same principles. In the year 1 curriculum we opened up Genesis 2 and talked about the garden God made, which has a name, and the people He placed there, who also have names. We then hiked the children down the road to a local garden that provides for friends and neighbor in our community. There we touched the fruits and veggies, ate the dirt (literally, some ate the dirt!), saw the bees pollinating the plants and then we enjoyed the produce of that garden which grows in the place where we live, the dirt we walk on. At the end of the day, back in the cool air-conditioned church building we read the story of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane and then about the garden in the New Heaven and New Earth. It is more than a children's story to learn that what began in a real garden will end in a real garden. It is the good news of all good news that while Adam disobeyed in the first garden, Jesus obeyed perfectly in the second so we could live forever with Him in the third.

That neighborhood garden is now the visual in our children's mind when they read about any of those gardens. It has become real for them. It's like God has moved into their neighborhood.

Author Wendell Berry was certainly thinking about your neighborhood when he wrote in, *Word and Flesh*:

The question that must be addressed, therefore, is not how to care for the planet, but how to care for each of the planet's millions of human and natural neighborhoods, each of its millions of small pieces and parcels of land, each one which is in some precious way different from all the others. Our understandable wish to preserve the planet must somehow be reduced to the scale of our competence—that is, to the wish to preserve all of its humble households and neighborhoods.

What can accomplish this reduction? I will say again, without overweening hope but with certainty nonetheless, that only love can do it. Only love can bring intelligence out of the institutions and organizations, where it aggrandizes itself, into the presence of the work that must be done.

Love is never abstract. It does not adhere to the universe or the planet or the nation or the institution or the profession, but to the singular sparrows of the street, the lilies of the field, 'the least of these my brethren.

Elsewhere, Berry tells about a woman who came up after a lecture and said to him, “I just love the environment.” Berry, in his 80-year-old Kentucky drawl, says he wanted to respond, “No, you don’t. We tend to name the things we love.” He’s right. Names change everything.

At our annual creek cleanup day, we remove all the debris from Yerba Buena creek so it won’t flood, as it often does. One time we were working next to John and Carol’s house. If we did not remove the debris, it would be their house, their belongings that would be flooded, not just some distant community we see on the news. The name makes all the difference in the world.

Let me close this with two stories to get you thinking about your place, personally.

Our town is on a common well. The large watershed that flows into Santa Margarita Lake is tapped to pump water from two active wells into two large storage tanks that serve the needs of our people. Just outside of town, however, each family is on their own private well for clean drinking water. Not long ago our local paper ran a story about a man who became seriously ill with an unidentified sickness. It continued to worsen until it was discovered that a neighbor was dumping his own waste into the sick man’s well. Disgusting, I know. It taught me a vital lesson and gave me one of my favorite memorable lines about the truth that people and place always go together. Are you ready for it? *You can’t love your neighbor and pee in his well at the same time.* Now, you’ll never forget it either. You’re welcome.

One more story about a life changing moment for my own Christian living in a real place with a real people. A few years ago, while many of these thoughts were coming to fruition in my mind, I was sitting on a patio on the campus of Trinity Western University. One of the pastors there said that his church was planning to reach 500 people in the next 5 years. The request came in response: “Name them.” The shock of that phrase brought us to new conversation. Why? We will do things differently when we have actual people in mind. If we are after 500 nameless, faceless people, we will put an ad in the newspaper. If they are friends and neighbors we will invite them over for dinner.

The same is true for the place. It is good to care about the environment, but caring for “the environment” is like wanting to reach 500 nameless, faceless people. It is part of God’s plan for the local church to care for the specific and named local stream, birds, fish and trees.

You are God’s people in the right place for the job. You can know the people and the place where you live, you can know its unique glory and spe-

cific troubles. You can know your neighbors, their stories, their hopes and their pains. You can bring the good news of Jesus and the new life that Jesus gave you to them in a way that no one else can. You can know the meadow and the creek and the animals that live in them, the challenges to their survival. You can help. You can put people and place back together. This is the kind of impact that a local church can have that no one else can have because God has placed us. This is why it is such good news that *you are here*.

Questions for Reflection

What is your place? Your here? What are its boundaries? Name its streets, creeks and watershed. Take time for this. Enjoy it. Epiphanies happen right here.

Who are your people? What are their stories? Name them.

What species of trees, birds, mammals and fish live there? What are their stories? Learn them.

What are the providential signs of God sending your church to that place and sending you in particular? Enjoy recounting some of your church's history.

What difference would it make for both the people and the place where you live if your local church believed that you were sent there as much as any missionary is sent to a foreign country? Pray big; start small. Remember the mustard seed.

Ideas for Action

While each community's context is different and actions will vary accordingly, a few examples of the work being done in other communities may help prime the pump. For free resources on these and more, see www.arocha-usa.org.

Gardens

Community gardens are springing up across the country. Churches, schools, neighborhood associations and groups of all kinds are converting lawns, flood plains, vacant lots and even rooftops to provide fresh, often organic, produce. And the benefits of gardening don't stop at the tomatoes. Done properly, community gardens serve to build, well, community. As neighbors work alongside neighbor, relationships develop, friendships bloom and community grows. Likewise, they serve to help heal the creation by providing much-needed food sources for our beleaguered pollinators; reduce overwatering and chemicals and lessen the damage done by transporting our food thousands of miles. They also offer wonderful educational opportunities for children and adults alike. Finally, gardens are a very non-threatening, non-controversial way for people and churches to engage in creation care. Start with a garden and see what grows—literally and figuratively!

Watersheds

Simply put, a watershed is an area of land that drains into a body of water—a creek, stream, river, lake or ocean. Every community is part of a watershed. Every thing happens in a watershed. They help define our place. And they tell us how we're doing at protecting the part of the planet where we live. Sadly, few of us know what watershed we live in, if we even understand the concept. Fortunately, that's changing. Many groups and churches have adopted their watersheds and are taking steps to protect them. First and foremost in those efforts is education—showing people what it means to live in that particular watershed, what the challenges are in protecting it and steps to improve its health. Those steps can include reducing the use of pesticides and fertilizers; reducing irrigation; planting vegetative buffer strips along banks and shores to filter and reduce pollution; marking storm drains to prevent dumping and more. The opportunities are endless, as are the potential partners.

Invasives

Each year, invasive plants, animals and insects cause billions of dollars of damage in the USA alone. They outcompete native species. They ruin

habitats and destroy water bodies. They even bring diseases that can affect humans. Controlling them is a huge task, one too big to be left solely to the “professionals.” Seeing this great and growing need, many groups are working—with help and direction from those professionals—to kill and remove invasives and reduce the havoc they wreak.

Monitoring

Critical to any conservation endeavor is scientific monitoring. Without it, we don't know exactly what the need is, how best to meet it or whether we have made any progress. Again, this is an area that needn't be left just to professional scientists. So-called “citizen naturalists” are incredibly helpful in protecting the planet by helping to monitor all sorts of things—from water quality to bird counts to the days on which buds burst in spring. All that's needed is a bit of advice and training, some basic tools and the commitment to go out and observe.

Education

No effort at caring for God's good creation is more important than education. We protect that which we love. We love that which we know. Biblical and scientific learning about the creation and how to protect it are absolutely critical. Churches and community groups can play a huge role—from Nature Care Camps to Vacation Bible Schools to watershed workshops and beyond. And the best environmental educational efforts are built on the backs of actual conservation work. There's nothing like engaging the hands to inspire the heart and equip the head and vice versa.

Good Seed Sunday

The ecological crisis we face is, in many ways, a church crisis. God's people have abdicated our role in caring for God's planet. Thus, bringing the church back into the game is critical. Each spring, A Rocha helps churches throughout the USA and Canada set aside a Sunday to celebrate, learn about and care for creation through free resources: Church Service Package, Bible Study and Small Group Materials, Sunday School Teacher Kit (ages 4-11), Ideas for Projects and more.

Eco-Congregation

As gathering places for God's people, churches should reflect our concern for God's creation. Conserving energy, water and other materials also, of course, saves money. Eco-Congregation is an in-depth curriculum and resource for greening church buildings and programs and teaching about the care of God's creation.

Addressing a Global Crisis—One “Here” at a Time

Around the world, people are starving, forests are dwindling and species are going extinct--in part because we have ignored and at times distorted the call to steward the earth. On top of that, an unbelieving world is watching to see what, if anything, Christians will do to care for the planet and the people we claim God created. We have often failed to live out what we say we believe. The ecological crisis, then, is actually a church crisis. And the size, wealth and global influence of the American church give it the unique ability to lead a response to this crisis.

And while there is much work to be done individually to lessen our consumption and collectively to call for legislative and regulatory changes, some of the most effective work is done working in our own communities to learn about, restore and protect the creation around us. In so doing, we can begin to bring God’s shalom forest by forest, stream by stream, community by community. All of which has profound impacts not only for that forest, stream and community, but also for the entire world. The American church truly can be a world leader—for good or, sadly, for ill. As Rev. Peter Harris, Founder of A Rocha, writes in *Kingfisher’s Fire: A Story of Hope for God’s Earth*, “No other context for A Rocha is changing faster than the USA one and maybe no other change is destined to have a greater impact on environmental conditions worldwide.”

We invite you join in us in creating that impact—right now, right in your own “here”.



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