



The Creation Collective at Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church enters its second year

By Benjamin Perry

“We believe that Christian communities are called to engage in deeper reflection and venture bolder action to support the just healing of creation for the flourishing of all. In partnership with Garrett Seminary and the Center for Ecological Regeneration, we’re committed to drawing on theological, ethical, scientific, and practical ecological resources as we seek to live into a hopeful vision of congregational and personal action in a climate changed world.”

These words open the Creation Collective’s mission statement. Last year, congregants at Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church in Minneapolis began meeting with Dr.

Timothy Eberhart, Garrett Seminary’s Robert and Marilyn Degler McClean Associate Professor of Ecological Theology and Practice and Director of the Center for Ecological Regeneration. In a class called “Hope for Creation in a Climate Changed World,” they worked to discern how the church could root more deeply in theological reflection and ecological repair. “We focused on better understanding the range of environmental crises that we’re facing, along with some of the causes and unfolding implications,” Eberhart explains. “That includes understanding how Christian beliefs and spiritual practices have contributed to ecological harm, but also how we might recover and re-orient Christian spirituality, worship, discipleship formation, and missional action for the sake of planetary healing.”

Over the spring months, the class engaged a set of regenerative design

principles to help members embrace Hennepin's place in the local geography, its historical commitments to education and justice, and its unique assets as part of discerning a congregational vision for regenerative ministry. As a result of that process, the class claimed the following:

"Hennepin Avenue embraces its vocation as a 'Cathedral for All Creation,' bringing together and supporting various denominational, ecumenical/interfaith, and public efforts for the just healing of the world. As a meeting place of confluent social, cultural, and educational systems, in a region ripe with diverse environmental assets, wisdoms, and efforts, Hennepin is a model and catalyst for regenerative convergences that flow inward for deep congregational change and outward for widespread systemic transformation."

In support of this vision for the congregation, the class proposed the formation of the Creation Collective, which is organized into six different "bee hives," each dedicated to different aspects of regenerative ministry—buildings and energy, land use, food and agriculture, worship and spirituality, Christian education and formation, and political advocacy, organizing, and outreach. While this scope of this organization and incipient action is impressive, members are clear that this energy would not be possible without the theological reflection that preceded it. "We had been searching for a way to do creation care before the pandemic, had actually formed a green team that met a couple times, but it never got traction," says Dan Dahm, a member of Hennepin since 1990 and one of the Collective's initial organizers. "The approach our partnership with Garrett brought us was what we needed to lay the foundation." Ginger Sisco, another decades-long Hennepin member, concurs with Dan's assessment. "Churches can go for the shiny object for a year's time and say, 'Well, we've done that,'" she observes. "What our partnership with a

seminary brings is the theological formation and grounding that keeps it alive and attracts others."

Sandy Christie was surprised by how much this process enriched her understanding. A retired architect whose firm specialized in sustainable design, she was familiar with much of the science presented but found that the connections to her faith facilitated new understanding. "Talking through the theology and learning the history of nature-engaged Christianity was really enlightening for me," she says. "It makes it feel more possible to nurture a different relationship to creation because that has happened in the past." For Hennepin's lead pastor, Rev. Elizabeth Macaulay, it was Dr. Eberhart's process that helped the collective grow its own agency. "What I've really loved about the way that Tim has handled this is that he doesn't push it, he lets it evolve ecologically," she says. "He's done good farming—trusting that what will take root will be what is indigenous to this time, this place, this church, this people."

One blessing the Creation Collective has already bestowed on the Hennepin community is greater connectedness between its members. "My circle of people at church has easily doubled in size," Dan says with joy. "We had 30-40 participants every week and, initially, I didn't know a lot of these people beyond their faces and their names," Sandy agrees. "Learning people's background and what they bring to this work is such a great bonding process." As connections within the class deepened, that spirit began to spread throughout the church community. "Yesterday, a woman was walking through the communal area where coffee is served in compostable cups and noticed that the church is not part of a system where compost gets picked up," Ginger says. "So, she picked up the cups, saying, 'Between church and home is a drop

off place for compost.’ She’s not actively in any of our hives, but she’s been paying attention.” Last year was Rev. Macaulay’s first at Hennepin, and she is quick to name how the collective’s flourishing has aided her own transition. “Honest to Pete, any pastor who could walk into a new appointment with this group being nurtured—it feels like I must have done something good in life,” she laughs. “I actually came out of retirement to serve and had become a little jaded about church—not sure that I had the heart and passion to do this work anymore—for this to be born in the middle of my own sense of possibility has been such a gift.”

This use of theological scholarship to strengthen local churches is one of Garrett Seminary’s broader commitments. “If our work stops being connected to the life of real communities of faith, it becomes an academic exercise and we lose the spirit and lifeblood of why we exist,” says Garrett President Javier Viera. “We all know Tim to be a serious thinker and ethicist, but he’s also a serious leader who seeks to kindle justice, compassion, and hope in the world.” For Eberhart, this interplay between church and academy is what makes the Center for Ecological Regeneration’s work distinct. “There’s sometimes a faulty assumption within our seminaries, and in our churches, that rigorous theological and moral conversations aren’t of interest in congregational spaces,” he says. “What I have always found is that laity are eager, in many ways desperately longing, to engage the depth of theological, spiritual, and moral reflection that happens in a seminary context.”

In fact, Dan was so moved that he shared resources from the class with colleagues at the Science Museum of Minnesota. “I pulled together a group from our green team here at the museum to read Robin Wall Kimmerer’s book *Braiding Sweetgrass*,” he says. “The reaction was so positive! The resources Tim brought to us let me bring a

part of myself to work that I had never been able to bring before.” For President Viera, this interplay between churches and their community is an integral part of revitalizing both congregations and our broader culture. “Too often, we still think about the church in a very specific way, as what happens within the walls on a particular hour, on a particular day of the week,” he says. “But when we also consider influencing leaders, civic organizations, and government to think more critically and ethically about the work they do—when we inspire greater moral seriousness—that’s the full work of the church.”



The Collective’s leaders treat planting hope beyond Hennepin’s walls as a core part of how the church can foster ecological repair. “If all we do is worry about the future and feel like we’re doomed, it’s almost impossible to move forward with any action,” Sandy reflects. “You have to believe you can make a difference.” As part of embodying this promise, the Collective planted a Three Sisters Garden outside the church. Drawing on Indigenous knowledge about environmental symbiosis, the corn, beans and squash represent the possibility of communities shaped by reciprocity and interdependence. “It’s a proclamation,” Rev. Macaulay says about the garden. “There are people who are church resistant, or church

agnostic at best—unsure that the church can be trusted—who have become deeply engaged in this process because the Collective’s method fits its meaning.”

Indeed, one of the Center for Ecological Regeneration’s core convictions is that congregations can play a pivotal role in nurturing climate resiliency and ecological repair. “Our congregations contain spiritual resources that are uniquely fitted to dealing with hard realities – like injustice, pain, death, despair – while at the same time cultivating compassionate and restorative responses,” Eberhart says. “It’s not an accident that some within the scientific community are turning to the world’s religious and wisdom traditions at this moment, recognizing that we’re going to need the kind of moral clarity, spiritual commitment, and collective action that religious communities have often provided at moments of historical crisis.”

For members of the Collective, their experience reflects the fruit of this approach. “The excitement that I hear from people who want to dig in and start doing things is

making me feel so optimistic,” Sandy confesses. For Ginger, it’s changed her relationship to the land. “Connecting this work to my spiritual life is really significant,” she says. “It’s a deeper appreciation of the way you’re raised and where you live.” Dan emphasizes the wonder he feels about life’s interconnectedness. “I’ve been spending time in my backyard watching the bumblebees, but it’s never just the bumblebees doing their thing. It’s the bees and the flowers growing over a season, the fungi that live in the soil and distribute fluids, the minerals moving from one plant to another,” he says. “The more time you spend with it, the more awesome it is.” The vitality of a congregation is intimately tied to the vitality of these pollinators, the vitality of a community inextricable from the vitality of the land. As the Center for Ecological Regeneration expands its work with congregations in the coming years, drawing on Garrett’s partnership with Hennepin, one can’t help but notice the reciprocal benefits. “We can always do more together than we can do alone,” Eberhart says. “We discover and generate hope in and through each other.”