NEPA Synod Green Team

e-newsletter #3, Fall 2022

ELCA Logo in sassafras leaves.
Created by Pastor Inge Williams at Friedens Lutheran Church, Shartlesville on October 13, 2021

Welcome to our newsletter!

We present to you this collection of prayers, tips and ideas on caring for God's creation, book reviews, news about and from notable places within the synod, advocacy opportunities, and inspirational stories of good work being done on our territory.

Any questions or comments on this newsletter would be appreciated – please send them to pwmetzloff@gmail.com.

Please feel free to share this with anyone who would be interested!

A Prayer for Fall in Pennsylvania

by Pastor Carl D. Shankweiler

Colors! Thank you, God for the variety of colors that enrich our world. Here with us in Pennsylvania the same scene can be white, green, brown, or—now that fall is here—yellow, orange, and red. Add above a blue sky with white clouds—or perhaps even a pastel sunset of purple, pink, or gold—and the natural world strikes us as incredible when we take time to view it with an artist's eye.

With fall's colors and the crispness in the air, no wonder fall is a favorite time for many of us. Add in the harvesting of various crops (from small, cream-colored soybeans to large, orange pumpkins); the excitement of returning to school; and the comfort of Thanksgiving Day—fall can seem like a perfect time. Thank you!

But God, we also see in fall your lesson that life is transitory. The colored leaves are destined to fall in weeks, not months, adding to our sense that time is passing quickly. Experience informs us that the crisp air will soon give way to threatening cold—we must prepare for ourselves and for others who will lack shelter! The harvests' bounty is tempered by an awareness that little new food will grow for months to come.

So help us, Dear God, to learn from fall the need to prepare—and to prepare not simply for warmth and food for the coming months, but also for the end of this life and the promised new life through Jesus, the time of your Great Harvest.

But while we still experience this incredible life on earth, always help us to notice, enjoy, and appreciate the colors!

Amen!

Green Tips

As things begin to cool off, here are some environmental tips for the Fall:

For outside: the leaves are falling . . . and we moan about raking and disposing, deadheading spent flowers, and on and on. I would like to suggest we all shift our frames of reference (just for a moment!) and check out what our Great Creator might have had in mind....

1. We are a perfection driven society! We're groomed and manicured, scripted and sanitized to death! I believe God wants wellness for us, and we could reduce some of our stress right here.
2. If you leave your dried flower blossoms gone to seed on their stems, the birds will have a café when the snow gets high. (#1 chore down)
3. As your leaves fall, they do many wonderful things, without our assistance: Slightly curled leaves fill with rainwater and become thirst quenching stations for the smaller creatures. Tightly curled leaves carry eggs and/or larvae safely to the ground (think of the song Rock a bye Baby) where they either hang out for the season, or crawl into the earth to mature in the spring....and provide nourishment for the birds, so please don't chew them up with your mower! (#2 chore down) A rake can clear your lawn if you wish, putting a blanket of leaves under the trees and helping our cardio.
4. These same leaves, left to themselves, are a better mulch than what we could buy in the store. (#3 chore down and a big cash savings beside!) And then if you really need to feel groomed, you can mow in the spring when the grass gets too high.

In sum – leave the leaves!!

For inside: many of us will be shifting over, in both our homes and our church buildings, from cooling to heating (though we can hope the time where we need neither is long!).

It's always a good idea to check over systems that haven't been used in months, including changing filters, cleaning vents and ducts, and making sure that thermostats are set properly (it's frustrating to realize that you've been heating a huge sanctuary that's been empty if a thermostat is mistakenly turned up – and that's real money wasted, too).

Do your best to be familiar with how your systems work (many churches have byzantine systems cobbled together over many different years and building phases), and make sure that your sextons and property folks know them as well.

Book Reviews

The Nature of Oaks - Doug Tallamy

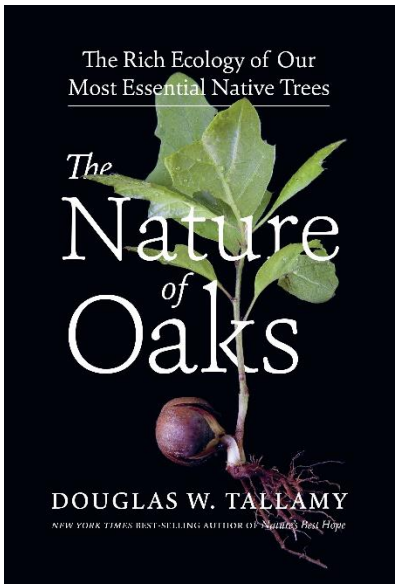
"What Can One Little Person Do?" is the title of a song known throughout the Children's Music Network for pinpointing the effects just one person can have in society...our ripple effects can be monumental! So too, can the attributes of one tree, especially the species oak.

In his book *Nature's Best Hope* (reviewed by Paul Metzloff in the second issue of the Green Team newsletter), the idea of private property owners converting their yards to areas which better support wildlife is likened to having a "homegrown national park", and the more individuals who do so, the more effective it is.

In this book, Doug Tallamy takes us month by month through a year of observing various stages of oak activity. Because it is indigenous, through the eons it has developed relationships with every lifeform in its niche. All oaks began millions of years ago in what was then Southeast Asia and spread around the globe; the USA features about 90 of the 600 species of oak. Jays (including our blue jay), evolved along with the oak, with just the right beak to pry open acorns. Perhaps the most mind shattering is the number of larvae species the oak supports: 511 (more or less)! These are the larvae which bring about native butterflies and moths, BUT also serve as the baby food (loaded with protein) for treasured songbirds, which have had a serious hit to their population. An amazing recent discovery is that some caterpillars live through the winter by adhering themselves half grown in only their 3rd or 4th molt ('instar' stages) to a tree branch, using their own body glycerin to prevent freezing. Here is winter food aplenty for birds!

Other important points about oak trees:

KEYSTONE SPECIES: These are flora or fauna which are vital to a high percentage of other species in that habitat. If the keystone species becomes absent from that area, the food web would collapse. Oaks are a keystone species.



HOST PLANT SPECIALIZATION: Each insect can only complete larval development on plants from 3 families at the most, which works out to about 1% of available plants. They cannot use others, as they have evolved ways to deal with the chemicals in their plant of choice. Other plants would be toxic to them. Many insects (511!) can use oaks.

Maybe we cannot fix all our planet's issues, but a couple of oaks in your territory would be a great start!

en Cristo,

Sue Reier

***Finding the Mother Tree* - Suzanne Simard**

In May 2021, forest ecologist Suzanne Simard released her book "Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest." She narrates her scientific discoveries in an autobiographical fashion, weaving together her family's story and life experiences with her pioneering research on the underground mycorrhizal networks that connect trees. Mycorrhizal fungi act as a kind of neural and social network through which trees share wisdom in their DNA about surviving flood, drought, insect infestations, etc. They also distribute energy-rich carbon through these networks, even across species, and "mother trees" nurture their young with their excess resources, the way human parents invest in their children. Her findings have challenged some common forestry practices, including the culling of "weed trees," the practice of clear cutting, and planting replacement seedlings without mycorrhizal-laden soil.

I finished the book in June 2021, shortly before the Parable of the Mustard Seed came around in the Lectionary. Professor Karoline Lewis pointed out on Sermon Brainwave that the parable may be better titled, "The parable of the fertile soil," since God's activity is really compared to the mystery of the soil's ability to produce without human intervention. In her book, Suzanne Simard illumines some of this mystery. Also in the Lectionary that Sunday were Ezekiel's righteous cedars who host the birds of the air in their branches. As you may have learned from Sue's book review of Doug Tallamy's *Nature of Oaks* (above), trees support ecosystems by hosting bugs who eat their leaves and thus birds who eat the bugs. Native trees like oaks host up to 450 species of caterpillars, therefore greatly increasing biodiversity.

As Suzanne Simard's work and these Biblical images conversed in my mind, I felt there were some important take-aways for the church:

1. The way mother trees function to support their young is not unlike the principles laid out in Growing Young. Churches are often places rich in elders, who have wisdom to share and stories to be heard, and who also gain purpose by investing their resources in the next generation. "Finding the Mother Tree" reminds us that inter-generational relationships are essential for life in community, while also keeping the church mission-focused on fledgling generations.

2. Mycorrhizal networks sustain forests through communication, cooperation, and a sharing of resources. Church ecosystems also thrive through these relationship networks, as we know from Family Systems theory. "Pillars of the congregation" often function like the righteous cedars - "mother trees" who are highly connected and can support an ecosystem of healthy relationships. This relational work is even more important as culture shifts and strong social bonds before entering the doors of the church cannot be assumed.

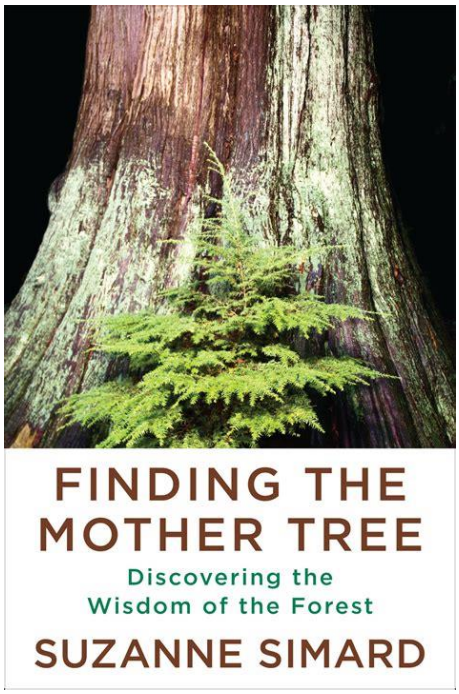
3. Suzanne Simard's book gave me a vision of a church that is well sustained by its underground relationship networks and shares generously of its resources with other trees in the forest and in the hospitality it offers as hub of the ecosystem. This pairs well with the hymn in our new hymnal supplement *All Creation Sings*, Que esta iglesia sea un árbol (May this Church Be Like a Tree). Pablo Sosa's gorgeous hymn prays that the church may stay rooted in its underground resources (the living water of God) while offering hospitality to its neighborhood and bearing fruits of justice and compassion:

Que_esta iglesia también sea como un árbol de la plaza,
nido de pájaros libres y refugio del que pasa;
y que sea como_el árbol de la_esquina de mi casa,
que me ve llegar de lejos e_imagino que me_abraza

Árbol plantado junto_a las aguas
de vida_eterna de nuestro Dios.

May this church be like a tree
there in the street or in the plaza,
for the birds a nesting-branch,
for passersby a welcome shelter.
May it stand as if it's watching,
near my house, just round the corner,
waiting for this weary pilgrim
with its arms wide to embrace me.

Tree ever growing by living water,
running eternal, flowing from God.



If you pick up this enriching book, I'll be curious what other parallels you see between her research and our life together as church.

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Inge Williams

Notable Places:

Berks Nature is non-profit conservation organization that has been serving the Berks County community since 1974. They operate with goals of land preservation, water protection, trail management, community gardens, education programs, and more. Based out of the LEED–certified Nature Place at Angelica Creek Park, which is a gathering place for schools, events, educational programs, and community needs, Berks Nature stewards 425 acres of leased land, owns 424 acres of preserves, and manages nearly 27 miles of trails.

They operate a nature preschool, have a natural playground and trails on their 100+ acre campus, and have a summer eco-camp. The four trail areas they directly manage are the Neversink Mountain Preserve, the Gravity Trail (on Mt. Penn, near Reading), Bob's Woods at Earle Poole Sanctuary, and the Angelica Creek Trail – all worth checking out!

Their website, with trail maps, links, and all sorts of other good information is at

https://berksnature.org/

Here's a closer look at some of the sustainable details of the Nature Place:

Advocacy/Action:

It's an easy one this month: vote!

Voting is one of the most significant things that we can do to help care for creation. There are plenty of ways to cast an informed vote, as well – our legislators' voting records are easily accessible. One good way to see how folks have voted at the state level is Conservation Voters of Pennsylvania website, which keeps an environmental scorecard on all state senators and representatives, as well as good summaries of the environmental bills they have voted on. It can be found at

https://scorecard.conservationpa.org/

and has a wealth of other good information as well.

At the national and state levels, the League of Conservation Voters also has a lot of useful data, including endorsements, a national scorecard, news, videos, and the 'Dirty Dozen' – a list of the twelve worst politicians in terms of environmental policy (a technique they started using in 1970, along with the first Earth Day). Interestingly enough, there are two candidates for high office in Pennsylvania that are on both the national and state lists . . . feel free to look them up! The Dirty Dozen is at

https://www.lcv.org/dirty-dozen/

and their overall scorecard is at

https://scorecard.lcv.org/

So, then, inform yourself – and vote!

Inspiration:

Congregational Solar: Part 1

When I came to my current call, Reformation (Reiffton) back in 2021, I had hopes of someday helping the congregation install solar panels on their church building – both as a financial benefit and an act of faith. Of course, as a pastor coming into a new call, this wasn't my top priority; getting to know people and functioning in the midst of the pandemic was. However, over the next few months, I floated the idea at property meetings (with very mixed reception), and went so far as to contact a local roofing/solar company to get an initial estimate.

That first estimate – which would have fully supplied all of our electrical needs – was extremely expensive, at about $150,000. That's far more than anyone was willing to spend, as we also have some large capital costs (for sanctuary window replacement) looming in our near future. I got another estimate for a much smaller system, around $50,000, but still didn't get the feeling that now was the time for this to happen. However, one of our council members made an offhand suggestion that somebody should look around for a grant to help pay for a solar array.

So, one afternoon when I had some spare time, I started looking for grants or other assistance for this sort of thing . . . and, after a couple of hours of internet searching, found a local organization – the Berks County Community Foundation – that did indeed work with the Med-Ed/Penelec Sustainable Energy Fund, and had funds available for nonprofits to invest in sustainable energy.

There were a couple of months until the deadline to apply, so I mentioned all of this to the church council, got permission to apply, and filled out the online form. Having served in the Army in a past career, I'm used to forms, and this one was certainly less forbidding than mobility papers are. Anyway, as time passed, I was called by one of the program officers of the foundation, who took the time to come over and talk with me and some of the council members and our staff; I was encouraged by his interest and positive comments.

We were then notified that we had indeed received a grant – a matching grant, 2-for-1, up to $50,000 – which meant that if we raised $25,000 within a year, we would receive an additional $50,000, for a total of $75,000 for the solar project. The council approved accepting the grant, and then the fundraising began . . .

. . . and went well! Interest had increased in the whole idea by this time, and I made a point to put out as much information, in as much detail, as I possibly could about the size of the proposed system, amount that would be saved, payback period, and the faith-based reasons for doing it. Caring for creation, being an example, and caring for our neighbor by using sustainable energy were all just as much a part of the conversation as the purely financial and practical concerns. Lots of questions were raised, and in addition to the council, the congregation as a whole (at a special congregational meeting) voted to move ahead with the fundraising and the project. In the end, and because of the generosity of our members, we raised the money in just over a month.

At this point, as we were discussing things in council, a member mentioned that we should, given the amount of money being spent, get more than one bid on the system and installer. I wasn't particularly excited by this, as I was eager to get moving and wanted to give the contract to the company that had given us the estimates, but agreed that it would probably be wise. So we formed a small committee of folks with some knowledge and experience with solar, and found two other companies (one local and one in Philadelphia) to look at our building and give us bids.

And, after a couple of months of work, I have to say that it was a very good thing to have looked at multiple bids. The committee (of which I was a member) looked at a whole host of factors, spoke in detail with all three of the companies, and it turned out that a different contractor was a much better fit for us and the type of system (more industrial than residential) that we will be needing.

That brings us up to the present. We've signed the contract with the installer, received the grant funds (thank you, BCCF and Met-Ed Endowed Sustainable Energy Fund!), and hope to have the system installed and working by the end of the year or soon thereafter. There have been some bumps along the way (our property insurance will increase, for one) and I'm sure there will be more, but so far it's been an exciting journey. I've learned a lot, and am looking forward to learning more as the process continues.

To conclude for now, then, I'd like to encourage any pastors or congregations out there that would be interested in this sort of thing to start – start talking about it, start looking for possible assistance (there are other grant sources out there!), start hoping and dreaming and praying and acting. I never would have guessed we would be where we are a year ago. And if I can be of any help to you, if you have any questions or want to discuss the possibilities, please – get in touch!

Looking forward to writing Part 2 –

Pastor Paul Metzloff

In Conclusion

details to follow on this project!
if you have questions or would like to donate seeds or plants,
please contact Kristen Weiner at kristenjweiner@gmail.com

Thanks for reading! If you're interested in being a part of the synod's Green Team, please see our page on the synod website at www.nepasynod.org/green-team.