NEPA Synod Green Team

e-newsletter #6, Fall 2023

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!

Prayer for Fall and Harvest:

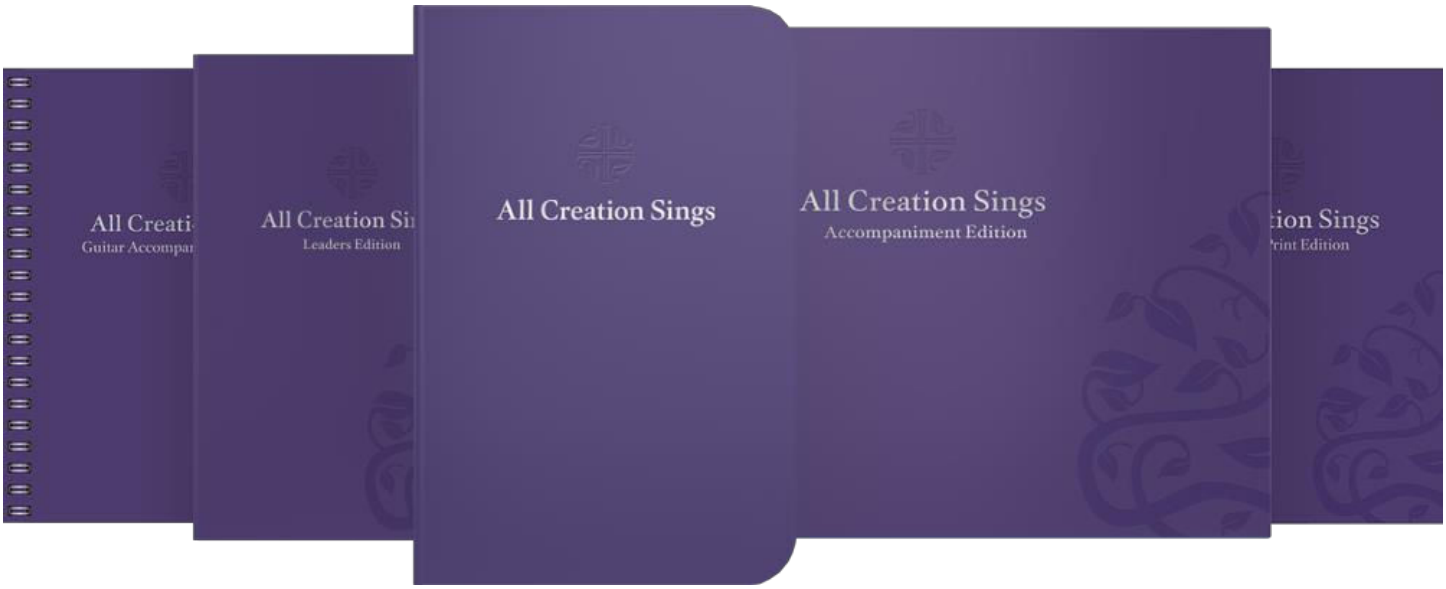
A prayer from the ELCA's newest hymnal, *All Creation Sings:*

God, creator of all living things, you fashioned a world in which lands and waterways, plants and animals, together meet the needs of all that you made. We pray that such vitality may flourish around the globe. Bless those who work the soil and who manage animals. Uphold their towns and villages. Nurture bees and other pollinators. Protect farmlands and ranches from drought and flood. Free children from forced labor in the fields. Grant an economy that can sustain those families who treasure a rural life. Teach us how to share with everyone the benefits of each harvest, and accept our gratitude for all sustenance you provide, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

Note: if you have not yet checked out All Creation Sings, we would highly recommend it – lots of wonderful new hymns as well as new resources. More info can be found at

https://www.augsburgfortress.org/promos/all-creation-sings/



Green Tips (Thanksgiving Version)

Some ideas for a plastic-free Thanksgiving (from Beyond Plastics):

https://www.beyondplastics.org/holiday-guides/thanksgiving

General suggestions from Treehugger:

https://www.treehugger.com/top-tips-for-a-green-thanksgiving-1203992

A few more from Utopia.org:

https://utopia.org/guide/how-to-have-a-green-thanksgiving/

And, finally, a long list of ideas from the Grove Collaborative:

https://www.grove.co/blog/sustainable-thanksgiving

Inspiration: Shall We Gather at the River? VBS in the Creek

By Pastor Inge Williams, Friedens Lutheran Church, Shartlesville, Pa.

"You know, Mom, if they really want more kids to come to VBS, we should go in the creek," he told his mother after overhearing the conversation at the Garden Team meeting. We were debriefing the growing season and noticing that the part of our ministry that resonated most with us was having children help harvest vegetables for the food pantry during Vacation Bible School. We were wondering how to further engage children through spiritual formation in our garden ministry. Ideas tend to come to me after meetings are over, too, so I was excited to hear this eleven-year-old's perspective a few days later and jumped at the chance to explore making it happen!

I saw that Berks Nature does Creek Snorkeling at their Angelica Creek campus, so I sent them an email asking if they would send someone to Shartlesville to be our creek guide. Friedens stewards fourteen acres of land (including the sanctuary and Christian Education wing footprint, parking lot, cemetery, outdoor chapel, woodland, and farmland we rent out) and through our little woods runs Wolf Creek, a tributary of the Tulpehocken. They were happy to put me in touch with Jan, a former Middle School teacher, who is a member of the Tulpehocken Creek Watershed Association and a Penn State Master Watershed steward.

"I'd like to come see who is in the creek before I lead the children there," Jan told me over the phone. After a member of the congregation weed whacked and trimmed down a clear access path to the creek, Jan came down for an initial tour. The magic of hanging out with Naturalists is that they see the world with a texture that eludes the untrained eye. Jan was delighted to find common stoneflies, caddis flies, water pennies, dragonfly nymphs, water striders, and fish in our ankle-deep creek, and we also picked up styrofoam cups, plastic bags, and a rusted roadside tire repair kit along the way.

As I showed her the extent of our trails, Jan exclaimed, "look at that owl scat!" Upon further inspection, I saw the golf-ball sized clump of hair encasing tiny rodent bones: the only remnants of a mouse after digestion in a bird of prey's stomach. One of the bones looked like a star bead you'd buy at the craft store- likely a disc from the backbone. Above our heads was a perch on the branch of a dead tree where the raptor had digested and defecated its dinner. "It's a vicious and beautiful world out there," I told her. I knew the kids were going to love hanging out with Jan.

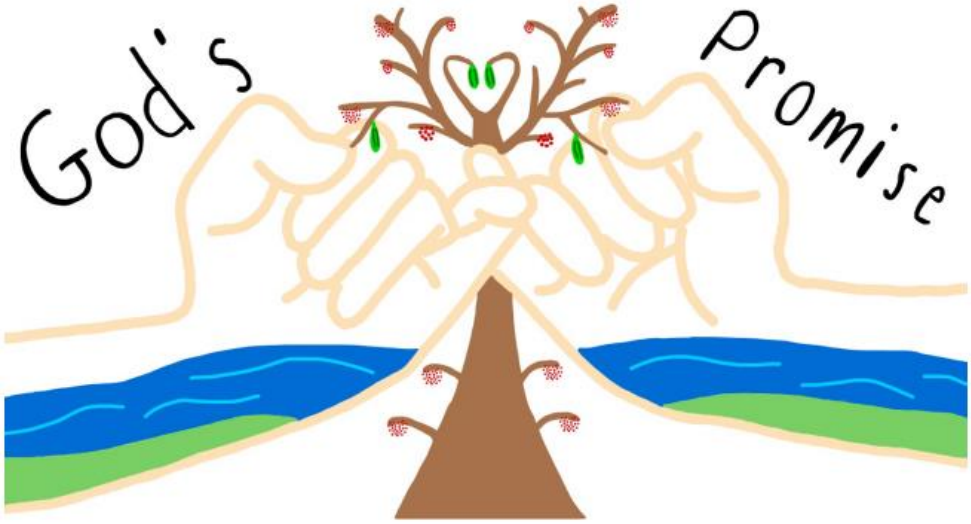
Our VBS Theme was "God's Promise," based on the image in Revelation 21 and 22 of a new heaven and earth, and each evening we explored a different them: water flowing clean from the throne of God, all people being fed from the Tree of Life, and the leaves of the Tree used as bandages for healing. On the first evening, we discussed how we can find out if bodies of water are clean, and Jan explained to us that it's the little bugs called Macroinvertebrates who can show us how healthy a stream is. Certain macros can tolerate pollution and others cannot, so they are the canaries in the coal mine of our waterways. Pastor Paul Metzloff, another member of our Synod's Green Team, introduced the concept of a watershed and how we are impacted by what happens upstream and influence our neighbors downstream.

We quickly discovered creek exploring is not for the faint of heart. For us two-legged creatures it's a balance exercise, even with only a few inches of water in the stream. And when we found a crayfish, one of the kids burst into uncontrollable sobs: "It looks like a lobster!" she cried. But I was proud of our intrepid explorers. Bug-phobic kids got friendly with water striders hopping in their nets; youth and young adults took the little ones by the hand; and even the adults couldn't help but marvel when life previously invisible appeared before their eyes under Jan's tutelage.

It turns out the macroinvertebrates we were able to find revealed to us that our stretch of Wolf Creek is relatively clean but not pristine; Friedens is only a few miles from the headwaters on the Blue Mountain but the water flows underneath Interstate 78 before reaching our church land. During our debrief, Jan helped us understand how the decisions humans make together can impact the creatures we just discovered in our creek. By first noticing and getting to know our fellow creatures the macroinvertebrates, we can then care for their home, our creeks, streams, and rivers, while also loving our neighbors downstream.

We read Archibishop Desmond Tutu's Children of God Storybook Bible chapter on Revelation 21 & 22, The Promise of a New Earth: God's dream will come true.

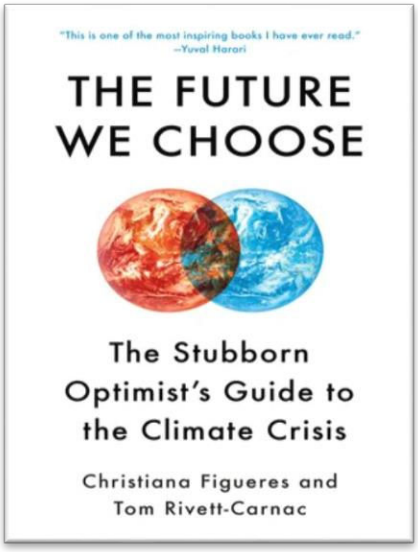
> "From this place," God said, "will flow the river of life, and from it I will give the water of life to everyone who is thirsty. On either side of the river will be the tree of life, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. You are my children. You are all brothers and sisters, my family. Come and drink, my beloved children, from the water that gives you life, love, and joy!
>
> Dear God, help me to make your dream of a new earth come true. Amen!



Book Review

"The Future We Choose: the Stubborn Optimist's Guide to the Climate Crisis"
by Christiana Figueres & Tom Rivett-Carnac, Vintage Books, 2020

Reviewed by Rev. Wayne D. Moritz



Being retired from parish ministry, I no longer preach on a regular basis. But every so often such an opportunity arises to stroll back into the pulpit. This will be the case for me on the second Sunday of November when I visit a friend's church not far from where I live.

To get a head start on my message, I looked at the Bible readings assigned for that Sunday. The Gospel text was familiar - the ten bridesmaids, five wise and five foolish, waiting for the Bridegroom to show up. The Old Testament lesson has the prophet Amos pounding away at the leaders of his time demanding justice for people. What caught my attention, though, was a phrase from the Epistle reading. Reminding his friends in Thessalonica to get ready for the coming day of the Lord, St. Paul tells them to "encourage one another" (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

Those three words quickly burrowed their way into my mind and spirit. Those are words we need to hear more than ever these days when it comes to the climate crisis. Those are words we need to do.

Consider what kind of summer it's been. This past July was the warmest July ever recorded. August followed in like manner. So now has September. And with the temperature rise come the effects we've been experiencing. Huge forest fires across Greece and Canada. Remember the horrendous air quality days of June? Unprecedented flooding in New York City in September and at other times in places as diverse as Libya, Vermont, and India. Droughts have scorched Chile and Somalia, posing horrific hunger crises.

Encourage one another in the face of such an environmental onslaught? Not easy to do. Yet that's exactly what two authors challenge us to do and tell us we can do in their book, *"The Future We Choose: the Stubborn Optimist's Guide to the Climate Crisis."* We now have a choice. We now have an opportunity, they conclude. It's only a matter of our "will" (p. xx) to do so. "We invite you to be stubbornly optimistic in the recognition that, despite the seemingly daunting nature of this challenge, collectively we have what it takes to address climate change now" (p. xxi).

The authors, Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac, helped shape and drive the adoption of the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change signed onto by 195 nations. In this book they acknowledge this decade, the 2020s, as the key moment for fashioning the livability of many decades to come. In the opening pages they sketch out two possible scenarios awaiting us. The first of a world in 2050 where carbon emissions have been left unchecked and the Paris accords unheeded (not pleasant). The second of life in 2050 in which carbon emissions have consistently been halved decade after decade (much nicer).

To accomplish the latter, they state in no uncertain terms, "requires a total shift in our thinking" beginning with our individual selves (p.39). In a way, it's like those ten

bridesmaids. We can choose to be wise or foolish as we prepare for the coming days. But choose we must. And choose we can. We have the ability. We have the knowledge. And we have the hope of what can still be.

The pages that follow are ones of sheer encouragement. For individuals. For families. For churches. For community groups. For those, like myself, who have only recently awakened to the climate crisis. And for those who have been working long and hard on caring for Creation. They begin with three mindsets we need to have. Then they follow with ten actions we can all take, which is my favorite part of this wonderful book. The actions range from moving beyond fossil fuels to reforesting the planet to advocating for helpful climate policies. But they take each action and present them in ways that we can incorporate into our everyday lives. Finally, the authors provide an action plan outlining what any of us can do right now, this week, this month, this year, or this decade.

"Encourage one another," the Apostle wrote all those centuries ago. It's a timeless message which this book builds upon as we journey through this decisive decade. When it comes to writing the story of how we choose to respond to the climate crisis, the authors leave us with this encouragement. "We still hold the pen. In fact, we hold it more firmly now than ever before. And we can choose to write a story of regeneration of both nature and the human spirit. But we have to choose" (pp.5-6).

Notable Places: Frog Hollow

Carl Shankweiler

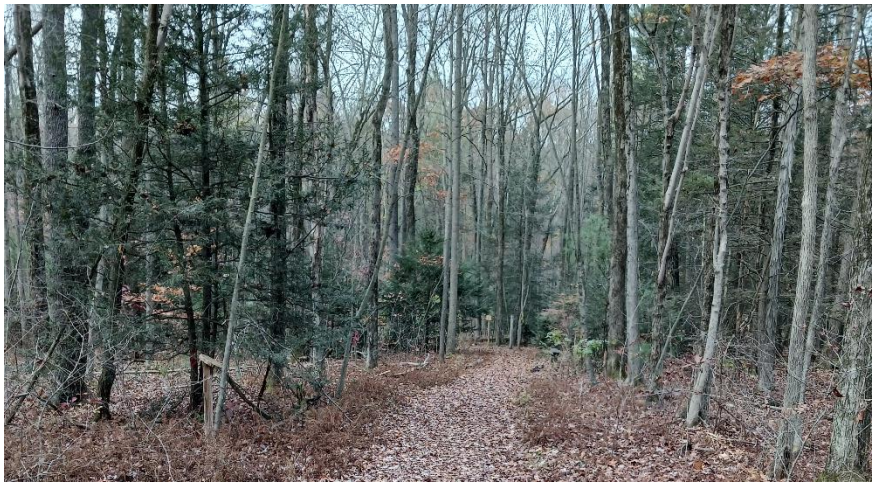
There are a few congregations that own a significant amount of land. This land can be the plots on which their churches stand, parsonages, other houses, and cemeteries. In a few instances, congregations own entire farms.

When a congregation owns property, stewardship of the land is not simply a matter of religious teaching by which other people are encouraged to be good stewards. Congregational land ownership enables the congregation itself to provide an example of good stewardship.

For a case in point, consider the Frog Hollow Environmental Education Center in Schuylkill County between Pine Grove and Schuylkill Haven on Stone Mountain Road. Twenty-eight acres in size, Frog Hollow was once private property; but the last private owner, Elsie Krammes, had a vision for something else. She bequeathed her property in 1986 to control by the South Schuylkill Garden Club so that it could be maintained as a place for public enjoyment in memory of her grandfather, Samuel G. Ryland.

This land included a house, forested areas, and wetlands that could be used for hiking trails, fishing, bird watching, and wildflowers. One person who worked with this resource, Sue Reier of the Schuylkill County Conservancy, once said, “You’re actually putting your feet on the ground and feeling the seasons.”

In time the Garden Club found the property to be too much to handle, especially when the trust that Ms. Krammes establish became depleted. Ms. Krammes's next provision was that ownership and control would fall to one of our synod's congregations, St. John Lutheran Church, Friedensburg.



What could the church do with the property? What should the church do? This congregation already had a sizeable plot of ground, large enough for their church building and parking lot, a separate building housing a Christian preschool, a pavilion, a small wooded tract, a ball field, an area recently used for a church garden, a custodian's house, and lawn areas. Could they handle Frog Hollow as well? St. John member Helen Moyer had also been active in the Garden Club; she was a voice of ongoing concern.

The congregation needed to deal with the issue of taxes: this land was not adjacent to their exempt property and so became taxable, an issue they needed to investigate. There were additional concerns such as vandalism, littering, and liability. The house on the Frog Hollow property was in poor condition and needed to be taken down for safety reasons. The original trust was gone, and so these expenses fell on the congregation, with an attorney advising that the property be posted, "Keep Out!"

Knowing that the property had been intended for public use, the congregation decided that Frog Hollow should be in other hands. At first the county did not want the property, and a local gun club felt that they could not afford to maintain it. Fortunately, the Schuylkill County Conservancy promoted public action to save Frog Hollow. First, they explored possible cooperative arrangements with St. John's. "Porcupine" Pat McKinney of the Conservancy encouraged the county government—beginning with Drew Kline of Schuylkill County Parks and Recreation—to secure a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). This process, which also required involvement by the county commissioners, enabled the county to buy the property from St. John's at a price that was considerably below its maximum sales potential. The congregation accepted the offer as a way to honor Elsie Krammes's intent and keep the property open to the public.

As Brad Elison, a congregational leader explains, "There was surprisingly little opposition to the below-value sale to the conservancy. One issue we considered was the existing use by many local residents. We felt it would be good community outreach to see it remain available for traditional use by residents." In the end, that DCNR grant allowed the purchase and transfer of the property from St. John's to Schuylkill County. When this transaction has been completed this year, Frog Hollow will be Schuylkill County's second publicly owned park. The vision of the original donor is being maintained; but for that to occur, her initial plans for land ownership needed to be changed. Along the way, many members of the community, government, and church needed to be involved.

How does your congregation decide what property should be kept, acquired, or sold/donated so that it is most likely to be used in a responsible way for the public good? You may not own dozens of acres, but most congregations own some land. What does responsible land management mean for you?

Advocacy/Action: Congregational Solar, Part 2

Paul Metzloff

Part 1 can be found at:
https://nepasynod.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/03-Fall-2022-Green-Team-Newsletter11.pdf

About a year ago, in our Fall 2022 issue of this newsletter, I wrote about the initial idea for my congregation, Reformation in Reiffton (just east of Reading), to install solar panels. That article covered the initial phases, including gradual support for the idea, the grant we applied for and received, the fundraising, and the very first steps. This one continues the story, starting with our hiring (after a process of bid evaluation and selection) an installer.

To quote from the previous article, we hoped "to have the system installed and working by the end of the year [2022] or soon thereafter." Turns out that was an extremely optimistic hope. There were a lot of details, bureaucracy, and other things beyond our control that we didn't realize back then. After we paid an initial deposit to the installer, there were designs and engineering plans that needed to be completed. Once those were done, in mid-December of 2022, then another significant payment was due – roughly 80% of the entire cost (so that the installer could purchase all of the hardware, panels, mounts, and so on).

On into the early months of 2023, where we were delayed yet again by an issue with the detailed construction/installation plans, which were both slow in coming and then had to be revised to be accepted by our electric utility, Met-Ed. Both the utility and our local government (Exeter Township) had approval authority for the installation, and getting both of those took a significant amount of time. There were then delays waiting for all of the equipment to arrive – particularly the mounts for the panels – which were held up by supply chain issues. Easter came and went, the sun was shining down . . . and no panels. It got to be extremely frustrating for us.

But, in the end, the slowly turning wheels of progress finally turned, and the installation began in late July. That, too, took time, as 69 panels take up a lot of space. Also, the integration of the energy produced by the panels into our electric hookup, which is a two-phase industrial type of system, was complex. Then, once things were completed by the installer, there was another round of approvals from the township and the acceptance of our interconnection agreement from Met-Ed, as well as the installation of the new meter, which is supposed to monitor both the electricity that we purchase from the grid and what we push back to the grid (when our system is producing more than we are using). And, of course, there is working with the monitoring system (yet another meter) that tracks all the energy that we produce.

But, finally, in early September,
the system was in.

Installed and activated.

Hooray! We're done, right?

Well, not so fast. While the system is complete, and producing electricity, and we even had a dedication ceremony (with the sun pleasantly shining), we're nowhere near done.

There are still issues with us being properly credited by our utility for the energy we produce; so far there have been multiple electric bills which are wrong, and we're in the process of trying to figure out with them what the problem is.

There is still the issue of being certified for generating sustainable energy, as there is a system of credits for this which can be sold (to further offset the cost of the system). We're working with that.

And, finally, since the terms of the Inflation Reduction Act allowed nonprofits to receive a 30% credit for installing solar, there will be paperwork that has to be filed with the IRS so that we can receive that credit. We haven't even started working on that, but will be soon.

So there's still a good bit left to be done. And while I find a lot of that frustrating – especially the billing problems (which I find just as, if not more maddening, as the delays in installation) – I try to remember that this is a part of it. This is still a fairly new thing; we're an 'early adopter' not so much of the technology but of integrating it into the existing power grid and other systems.

And it's important, if we're really going to shift away from fossil fuels and into sustainable energy, for us to go through all of these many and various hassles so as to make it easier for others to do it after us. No transition to any big new thing is easy.

So I take some comfort from that (even when I'm annoyed), and joy from the fact that 69 new panels are now making electricity and not producing any CO_2. So far we've offset over four tons of carbon, and that's a good thing.

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.