

# Faith and Life REFLECTIONS

## "Ritualizing Nature: The Assembly as a springboard for dealing with ecological crisis"

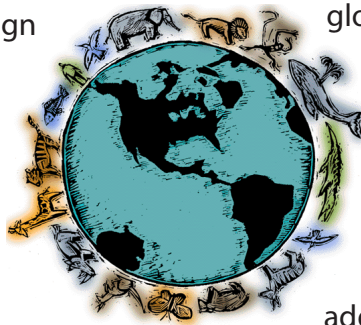
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Faith and Life Reflections are a regular resource for lay and rostered leaders on headlines, current books, movies, and social and ethical issues. Comments may be returned to the writer, or to the editor, Mark A. Staples, email [Mstaples@Ltsp.edu](mailto:Mstaples@Ltsp.edu).

This article is written by Mark Staples.

### Focus of our Reflection

Recent political discussions have focused on the energy and environmental crisis facing the globe and its citizens. Rising and fluctuating gasoline prices and Presidential campaign rhetoric have done much to prompt headlines around this topic. These issues are not new. In 1993, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, meeting in churchwide assembly, approved the social statement *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice*. This reflection is considerably inspired by LTSP Alumnus the Rev. Dr. H. Paul Santmire '60, whose pioneering life work and writing has focused on the growing environmental crisis from a Christian theological perspective.



The earth is the  
LORD's, & everything  
in it, the world, & all  
who live in it.

Psalm 24:1

logging in ancient growth forest, personal habits in food consumption, farming practices, treatment of animals in livestock production, laboratory research and hunting, land-use planning, and global food, development and population questions."

The statement "remains a good piece of theology that was ahead of its time and is still relevant," Santmire says, urging lay and rostered leaders to revisit it and discuss it in their congregations. "Yes, ELCA members today will want to think additional thoughts, since the situation of our earth has changed, for the worse, since the statement was approved. But ELCA members should be conversant with what their church is asking them to be and do. Everything ELCA members, both clergy and laity, need to know is right there in that statement."

### Introductory thoughts

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) received its "marching orders" to play a churchly role in addressing the environmental crisis 15 years ago when the church in assembly approved *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice*, argues the Rev. Dr. H. Paul Santmire. Santmire was honored in 2004 as LTSP's "Distinguished Alum" for his life-long work in striving to connect people of faith to ecological concerns and ethics. Santmire helped to author the social statement. Among many other things, the statement calls for "congregations and other expressions of the church to model the principle of participation... in our discussion of environmental issues such as nuclear and toxic waste dumps,

The author of several books and many articles, Santmire has just written *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis* (Fortress Press, 2008, \$25). His book argues that ritual forms communities and defines Christians and their assemblies. Thus, ritual and liturgical renewal will play a key role in shaping the Church's voice and actions on nature and human life in nature matters. Throughout many periods of modern history, Santmire argues, theologians have often not done a good job of connecting theology to nature, and so the church has frequently lacked forceful voices advocating for the care of the earth. In Genesis,

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humans are called upon to care for and to till the earth. Santmire notes that he is grateful to the late Dr. Martin Heineken, LTSP theologian and long-time faculty member, for greatly influencing his career direction. "God chose the world and nature as a stage to have a drama with humans," he notes. And Santmire describes Reformer Martin Luther's view that God is "with and in all things," noting that the miracles in a grain of wheat overflow.

Further, Santmire says that a proper celebration of liturgical renewal in our congregations "will be an opportunity to celebrate the renewal of all of creation." Two liturgical practices he advocates are "employing the full Eucharistic Prayer every Sunday, which gives voice to the creation-faith of the Bible, and employing the full baptismal prayer (Luther's "flood prayer") in every Baptism."

The challenge for preachers and Christian assemblies, Santmire says, is to use those assemblies "to send people into the world on a new theological pilgrimage. How do we share what we discover in our worshiping communities?" How we "go out" is a major challenge. Through liturgical renewal in assembly, Santmire says, we can rediscover "the awe of the whole earth, which is full of the glory of God, the notion of service – how to protect nature, and finally how to partner with each other to participate in our world, which is in environmental and economic crisis."

"Humans on earth, especially the affluent, must change their patterns of life on earth radically, within the next 10 years or so, if irreversible forces of ecological destruction are to be avoided," Santmire says. "In this context, thoughts about liturgical renewal sound like some pious pie in the sky, but I believe we should do everything at once, liturgical renewal as well as political and ecological repentance."

## Discussion questions

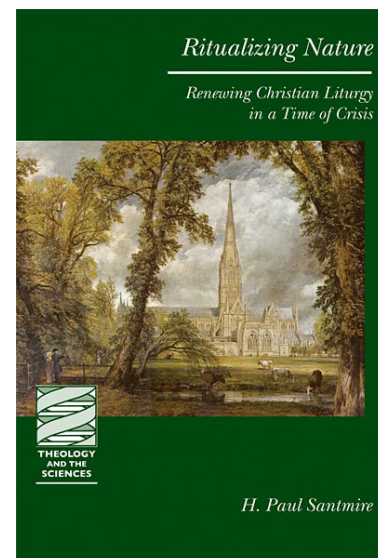
1. How do you feel about the notion of liturgical renewal as a springboard for a new theological "pilgrimage" into the world?
2. Does your congregation have "partnership"

practices to deal with the environmental crisis? (One congregation near LTSP has a regular volunteer crew that cleans refuse and litter from a major roadway, for example.)

3. Do you agree with Santmire that if dramatic action doesn't take place in the next 10 years that "irreversible forces of ecological destruction" will take place?
4. What household practices do you employ that are environmentally friendly? What else might you do?
5. What environmental issues in your neighborhood and community might you address? How?
6. What other forms of advocacy might you address?

## Additional Resources

1. *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice*, an ELCA social statement found at <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/Environment.aspx>. Use the term "environmental activities" to search the ELCA Web site for other materials.
2. See Dr. Santmire's Web site: [www.hpaulsantmire.net](http://www.hpaulsantmire.net). Dr. Santmire is available to advise synods and congregations about good green earth practices. He recently has engaged the North/West Lower Michigan Synod in such a strategy.
3. *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis*, H. Paul Santmire (Fortress Press, 2008), [www.augsburgfortress.org](http://www.augsburgfortress.org).



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