

Faith and Forest Project

Focus Group Findings

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BACKGROUND

Focus groups were organized spring 2015 to help the leadership team of the Faith and Forest Project better understand perspectives of faith community participants regarding:

- How do landowners and faith community members describe the connection between faith and forestry?
- What opportunities are there to further engage landowners through their faith, and what barriers may exist to doing this?
- What are some potential themes, reoccurring language (e.g. “stewardship”), or iconic images that participants use to describe their connection to faith and their land?

These questions emerged from previous efforts by the project, which was initially focused on exploring if private landowners could be further motivated to engage in forest management through their faith values. After a series of interviews with faith leaders in Southwest Wisconsin in 2013-14 there was considerable interest in the topic and a steering committee was charged with deciding how to convene landowners at an event to explore this idea. An event was organized, modeled after the Land Ethic Leaders workshop offered by the Aldo Leopold Foundation with components of observing, participating, and reflecting, which aligned nicely with both the faith community and landowner actions. While there was a lot of interest, the registration on two different attempts remained low and difficult to justify the resources to run it. However, the interest in this topic remains, so instead of having the landowners come to an event members of the leadership team planned to go to them by attending their church services and meeting with them afterward for a focus group.

Four faith communities in the Kickapoo Valley were contacted to inquire about hosting a focus group. Two of which occurred (n=16 congregation members) on April 12th and 19th. The other two were cancelled because a date couldn't be determined for one, and the other due to a death in the congregation and rescheduling was not an option due to upcoming schedules. Given the low participation rate, follow-up interviews were conducted with clergy of two churches (1 of which had also done a focus group) to further explore themes that emerged from the focus groups and potential recommendations to advance the project. Additionally, 11 other congregations were contacted for an interview, but no others agreed.

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

What methods were used to recruit participants, conduct focus groups, and analyze the data?

- Local residents who had existing connections to the conservation community as well as a faith community were approached and asked if they would be willing to host a discussion post service in their congregation. These individuals explored this option with their congregation leadership. Where all parties agreed, the Faith & Forest project provided them a flyer to post and/or short description to help advertise the discussion.
- The Faith & Forest project also provided coffee, juice, and snacks during the focus groups.
- One member of the project leadership team along with an independent evaluation consultant facilitated each focus group. The consultant provided an overview, ground rules, established consent to audio record the discussion, and facilitated the discussion using a semi-structured question guide, while the project member took notes and observations from the discussion.
- The audio files were transcribed verbatim and open coded using QSR NVivo software to organize the data and explore emerging themes.
- After these focus groups, clergy were contacted directly by Faith and Forest Project leadership to inquire about willingness to conduct an interview. These interviews were conducted over the phone and/or in person, and when possible were also recorded and when not, typed notes were taken. The notes were reviewed for themes and insights to inform future recommendations.

What was the timeline for the work?

- Selection and recruitment of host locations January – March 2015
- Focus groups conducted April 2015
- Sent recorded audio files for transcription - ongoing
- Focus group analysis – April –May 2015
- Interview recruiting with clergy – June 2015
- Interviews – June 2015
- Final analysis and reporting – July 2015

FINDINGS

How do landowners and faith community members describe the connection between faith and forestry?

Almost all participants felt their faith plays a role in land decisions; only one person stated they didn't see a connection or feel faith played a role. Faith was described as playing several different roles, depending on the individual's experience, including:

- Providing guidance including but not limited to examples of stewardship from the Garden of Eden
- Reminder of humility and our level of knowledge and relationship with the land
- Perspective both generally and in terms of time, scale, and scope of human's ability to influence the land
- Hope or faith that change is possible
- Traditions or framework for spiritual connection(s) to the land

One person said: “...*I think a lot of our decisions are made on our faith. We've been brought up in our faith and we've lived by our faith and if we don't share that faith, then the next generation is not going to know... I've lived long enough [chuckles]. I know that we need that.*”

Those that described faith playing a role spoke of the need to pass this on to others, while also admitting it is not something that they often talk about or share with others, nor specifically give a lot of thought to. The evaluation consultant who facilitated the focus groups, Bethany Laursen, reflected on this from her experience as the facilitator and as a Christian who values environmental stewardship:

“I think this tension between acknowledging as essential while not speaking about it is almost universally true of devout Christians (speaking as one). Faith becomes a part of the fabric of our lives, like breathing, so when we are asked about it, we'll tell you it's essential, but most of the time, we take it for granted. You can't always be thinking about the act of breathing or you'd stop living. And I think that is probably how Christians new to land management would use faith: first, actively connecting and reflecting on why faith means I should manage my land, and then, once I'm in the daily practice, it is often in the background (whether that's good or bad, it is). That's certainly been my experience of Christian-grounded motivation of environmental stewardship. i.e. advanced landowners might not need or want a 'faith-based' land management course. They'd just want to do it. Newcomers would probably need some church-sponsored Bible study first.”

What opportunities there are to further engage landowners through their faith and what barriers may exist?

All participants shared a story of what they enjoy about being in the woods and how they connect with nature through a variety of experiences and conditions. Some participants spoke of having a place to retreat to that was quiet, private, and a place that was “theirs”—a place they could connect with even if they weren't the legal owners. Others enjoyed time most in nature when it was spent with others whether those were their kids, grandchildren, or friends and/or neighbors. Individually or with companions participants described how much they enjoyed caring for or nurturing parts of nature (e.g. cleaning up a site, tending to a garden) watching the change of seasons, exploring unique features on the landscape (e.g., streams, vistas), observing wildlife, recreating on the land (e.g. hiking, photography) and/or seeing the changes that occur over time beyond seasonal changes.

For those who were recently in the woods, they spoke of five main activities or purposes for their visit. These can be grouped into themes listed in order of frequency of mention (higher = more mentions):

- Walking and hiking
- Observing – generally taking notice of surroundings and exploring what is present
- Pondering potential management practices
- Implementing a timber management activity
- Monitoring prior stewardship practice implementation sites

Participants who were implementing practices described a suite of challenges and barriers they face or would anticipate facing. Many of these are similar to what is noted in other landowner research. These include:

Individual:

- Lack of knowledge regarding resources, techniques, contractors, and/or best management practices
- Time and energy to implement practices along with age associated challenges
- Balancing of priorities and where management fits among other priorities
- Feeling of being overwhelmed by not knowing what is best, options or scale of the project/potential of projects

Ecological:

- Invasive species or native species competition with desirable species
- Terrain and associated challenges for logging or other management
- Natural disasters

Social:

- Taxes and implications for land management
- MFL program
- Government oversight (often connoted as overbearing)
- General lack of respect for or understanding of the environment
- Industrial pressures (e.g. frac sand mining)

One participant was describing the challenge of knowing what is best and the uncertainty that can exist: ***“...[it’s hard to know] if our activities are actually harming the resource base, [if] we’re screwing something up pretty big. So to figure out how to be as good as that [natural] process alone, and maybe even do it one better, like thinning in the woods -- if you don’t thin your carrots out, you won’t get big carrots. If you don’t thin your trees out, you won’t get big trees. We can actually be a beneficial impact on the planet, instead of a detrimental one.”***

While admittedly there are challenges, several participants shared suggestions for trusted sources to gain information to help inform management decisions. These included local or DNR foresters and consultants who were mentioned most often, followed by the Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association, neighbors and/or community members, local organizations including RC & D offices and also the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, and then more generally conferences and books. No specific conference or books were mentioned as resources, only that these are places that people have or would seek information. One participant said:

“Kickapoo Valley Reserve has many programs. You have to broadly expand your definition of faith. They may not be church people down there, but they have faith and they get faith-like experiences. We’ve had some described here today. But they may not be in a church building, or organized church congregation, or they may not be led by clergy, but there are many things like that. There are also many consultants now in the area...”

Another said: ***“It’s all set up, there’s infra-structure already there. Every county has a forester or more than one. They have all kinds of planning programs available to you, we have state nurseries spread through our state with all varieties that will grow. You just have to ask and be willing to learn.”***

While these were known to some, there were other participants who were not familiar with these mentioned sources for forestry information. A few participants also shared examples of where others are using faith to inform caring of the land and/or where this topic could be further explored including: generally in faith centers and also through social media and more specifically using the Green Bible and Franciscan Spirituality Center in LaCrosse, WI (www.fscenter.org) as resources. Again, these resources were known by a few participants and for others it was the first time they heard of them.

What are some potential themes, reoccurring language (e.g. stewardship), or iconic images that participants use to describe their connection to faith and their land?

The discussion on the meaning of “caring for the land” took two different directions, with each focus group primarily discussing one of these themes more than the other. One interpretation was more symbolic and spiritual while the other was more tactical and applied. Without more data collection we don’t know if these themes are unique to these congregations, are two inherent anchors in the general discourse with each of these congregations falling into one or the other, or if there are additional distinct interpretations.

Those that spoke of the first talked about themes of:

- Custodial relationship as temporary care takers while they are alive
- Seeing humans as a part of nature and not separate from it
- Being a participant with the land and not being apart from or outside of it
- Deep spiritual connection with the land grounded in various personal experiences

Beyond the phrase “caring for the land” some talked of “caring for Creation,” for example: ***“I think “caring for the land” is all encompassing but for me personally [as a Christian], I feel more emotionally involved when I say “caring for creation” because God's creation is important to me. And obviously we have to accommodate everyone's way of thinking and how to care for the land. So “caring for creation” probably isn't politically correct but I would like to say “caring for creation.”*”**

The more tactical and applied interpretation explored themes of:

- Keeping the land tidy and orderly
- Applying practices that mimic nature
- Apply organic practices
- Agricultural practices and methods to tend to the land

Many practical examples were shared about practices that implied a level of care for the land; this story demonstrates this: ***“...I've got some really good clients that have become really good friends and we've had this discussion a lot on how we can keep everything going perfect or improving it. One good example is a guy that he's bought two or three farms that people have struggled with financially, and he's ...put waterways in the fields, and graded the fields where it was eroded, and brought the land back up and put it back on [fields] and plants trees in them, or grasses in them. Where I grew up, we've pretty much went from fence row to fence row... we didn't have as big of hills and so we could do that, but I'm surprised most of these guys have so much land for that [planting] they take so much care for it, they don't crop [it all]...[some is] for the wildlife. The ridges and the holes and stuff that have eroded before us. It's got trees growing on it and grass growing on it where the wildlife can have some refuge. It just amazes me. To me it's like I worked and raked right to the stone wall, but they leave so much ground in conservation. I have learned a lot from those people, on how to take better care of the land.”*”**

While some participants felt a connection to the phrase “caring for the land” others didn’t feel it resonated as much as the term “stewardship”, yet a few reacted more negatively to this term than “caring for the land”. In short, there was not overall agreement on which would be the preferred term but perspectives on this term provide insight as well. Themes included:

- Implying (in a positive way) that people are responsible for their decisions and how they care for the land
- Love, care, and respect are components of stewardship
- Level of care for something larger than oneself – a “gift” to care for
- A term connected to past requests from the faith community for financial support and alms
- An arrogant mindset and view of the relationship between people and land that could verge on patrimony.

One person said: *“I think that stewardship is a little bit of a disconnect [and] that you're just there as the caretaker... for me, I think the word caring is closer than stewardship, because I think you care for one-another, it's a form of love. Caring in the definition of love, rather than caring in the changing diapers, or something. I take care of your physical needs. And I think that **for me, that's what caring for the earth-- or for the ground means - or the environment - that you love it, you care it, you want to be good to it, you want it to be good back. You want to impart this love of the land to your children, to your neighbor's children. Instead of caring as a steward or a caretaker, I think it's living, and loving, and breathing.** Maybe it's that spiritual connection. I guess I- - stewardship, if that's the word we have to use, that's fine, but for me it's more than that.”* Others disagreed and felt love was a component of stewardship.

A few individuals offered up two other phrases that they personally felt better represented their role and connection with the land including: 1. Participant with the land, and 2. Collaborative partner. There was little discussion from other members to discern the resonance level of these relative to “caring for the land” and “stewardship”.

What advice do clergy have about advancing the conversation regarding faith and forestry?

- In the congregations represented the topic of “caring for the land,” “care for Creation,” and “stewardship” are not discussed to the level in the congregation that it could be.
- There could be opportunities to connect on an individual and congregation level to these ideas through scriptures for stewardship including the Parable of the Talents. This could be one way to broaden the discussion of “how do we take care of what we’ve been given” including stewardship of Earth’s resources. Also mentioned was the role trees play in the scriptural story and the potential for this to be explored further looking at the symbolism and what it means for daily life and the care of resources.
- Suggestions of opportunities that exist within these two congregations to expand the discussion between faith and forests seemed to focus on local or site specific issues (i.e. individual and congregation paper usage) and not broader aspects of forestry such as private lands management.
- Both suggested that for new ideas or projects to gain traction, amongst all the topics and activities the clergy is responsible for, it is best for there to be a local champion for an idea within the congregation. Outside experts can provide added value, but alone might not be familiar with the nuances within any given congregation to successfully organize and host an event that creates energy and movement on a particular topic within the congregation.

- In terms of logistics, events would need to be announced at least 1-2 months in advance and ideally hosted after the service. Suggestions of events included:
 - a discussion followed by a service learning event,
 - discussion and inventory of the earth resource usage of the congregation,
 - hosting a workshop in conjunction with the Wisconsin Council of Churches who already has a strong commitment to creation care,
 - extending an invite to local “friends” groups focused on woodlands to share their interests and opportunities with the congregation, and
 - invite a speaker from an active ministerial organization to talk on the topic of faith and forest, one such group is the South Conference of the Synod of LaCrosse in Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

NEXT STEPS

What did we learn?

- Getting access to faith community members to better understand their perspectives was difficult in terms of finding willing congregations, a time that didn’t interfere with faith traditions, and so on. To better address this moving forward we recommend having a connection or champion within the faith community that is interested in the project you are proposing and who is willing to approach clergy and congregation members to help facilitate the program or project.
- We believe the faith community is an untapped resource for reaching private forest owners. However, when compared to food and agriculture (which has made progress at deepening the connection to individuals faith) society in general is less familiar with forestry and the values it provides. This disconnect may pose challenges in fostering the connection between faith and forestry and using faith as a driver to inspire deeper engagement with the land and specifically forests.
- The language that you select to represent this connection between faith and the land matters and may vary with denominational affiliation and occupation type. Terms such as “caring for the land”, “caring for creation”, and “stewardship” come with a variety of interpretations and more research could be done to further explore which audiences may be receptive to which term, or perhaps other terms.
- There is room to expand and deepen the conversation around faith and forests. Focus group participants seemed to enjoy the opportunity to discuss their thoughts with others. However, at this time it is unknown which format of activities or events (e.g., open discussions on Faith and Forest, technical trainings held at churches, mobilizing a congregation to take certain actions for Faith and Forest) might be most appropriate to advance the conversation to encourage further engagement with the land. Through the interviews some suggestions were provided; however none were tested.

What might some next steps be?

Use these findings and recommendations to inform further research questions including:

- Which terms resonate with which types of faith-based landowners?
- Do landowners of faith already participate in land management at rates higher, lower, or equal to the general population?
- Of those faith-based landowners who already manage their land, why did they start managing, and why do they continue?
- What is more effective at engaging landowners: a congregation champion pointing people to existing resources and creating opportunities to explore the connection between faith and forest? Or a new, faith-based landowner training event or workshop?
- How can conservation professionals inspire individuals to be more active stewards of the land through their faith?¹

Footnote:

¹The evaluation consultant who facilitated the focus groups, Bethany Laursen, reflected on this from her experience as the facilitator and as a Christian who values environmental stewardship:

“Speaking from my personal experience and from what I heard in the focus groups, people will not listen to conservation professionals who attempt to talk about faith if that professional is not him/herself a believer, too. In fact, even a fellow believer may not have the perceived authority to “teach” someone to do something based on their faith; it may need to be a clergy member or someone recognized by the clergy as a reliable source of authority. The pulpit is the strongest place of authority in the church; the further you get away from it, the less authority you have to inspire someone to action based on their faith. It’s fundamental to what we believe: no one has the authority to interpret faith or “burden my conscience” to a point that I am required to act unless it is explicitly or almost explicitly sanctioned by an ordained minister.--and even then, I can demur if I believe the word of God says differently. Even Christians with PhDs (like Cal DeWitt and S. Bouma-Prediger) are viewed with some skepticism (the barrier to belief-motivated action is higher) vs ordained ministers, or at least those with some formal theological training.

“Now, if the ordained minister gives indication or teaching s/he sanctions caring for the land/forests based on faith, and then directs people to someone who just knows a lot about land management but may not even be a Christian, people will take action. The other reason they would go to a non-Christian forester is if they just see that it makes good sense (apart from explicit faith motivation). I guess you could say ministers are gatekeepers. Not completely, because sometimes a congregation will change apart from the minister, but almost always it takes the minister’s “blessing.””

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