Real Faith in a Synthetic World

PLASTIC *Jesus*

Creation Justice Ministries
creationjustice.org

cbf Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

PLASTIC JESUS

Real Faith in a Synthetic World

Everywhere we look in our culture you will find plastic.
It surrounds our food, it makes up our technology and it is a standard element in our household items. Unfortunately, it is also overflowing from our landfills, floating in our waters and polluting our soil. More and more, you can even find it in our own bodies and those of other living creatures. There have even been traces of plastic found in breast milk. Despite the fact that we have learned the harms of plastics, we are steadily increasing our production of the material and integrating it into more and more items. Plastic is everywhere!

One place where you will not find plastic, however, is in the Bible.
This resource is designed to help congregations think more deeply about the ways that plastics impact our lives and God's creation. It is also intended to equip people of faith to take actions to address this epidemic in faithful and practical ways.

In the pages that follow, you will find stories of individuals and communities making a positive impact, sermon starters to spark meaningful discussions in your church, worship resources to unite in prayer and reflection, and actionable steps to address the plastic crisis in your life, community and our world.

CREATION JUSTICE MINISTRIES

JUSTICE FOR GOD'S PLANET AND GOD'S PEOPLE

Creation Justice Ministries educates, equips, and mobilizes Christian individuals, congregations, denominations, and communions to protect, restore, and rightly share God's creation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Creation Justice Ministries Board Contributors

Rev. Brooks Berndt, United Church of Christ

Rev. Dr. Jeanette Bouknight,
Christian Methodist Episcopal Church

Phoebe Chatfield, The Episcopal Church

Rev. Dr. Betty Holley,
African Methodist Episcopal Church

Jessica Maudlin, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Christine Moffett,
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Hannah Williams,
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

Rev. Caleb Cray Haynes, Nazarenes for Creation Care

Creation Justice Ministries Staff Contributors

Derrick Weston,
Theological Education and Training Coordinator

Karyn Bigelow, Co-Executive Director

Avery Davis Lamb, Co-Executive Director

Jasmine Coles, Operations and Executive Assistant

Tess Koontz, Brethren Volunteer Service Fellow

Chair of Resource Committee
Jessica Maudlin

Photographer
David Hutchinson

Graphic Designer
Mark Thomson

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The image of "Jesus" used throughout this resource is satirical and is no reflection of our understanding of the historical person of Jesus.

Introduction

First created in 1907, synthetic plastic began being produced on a global scale in the 1950s. Over the next 70 years, annual production of plastics increased nearly 230-fold to 460 million tons in 2019.[1]

Single-use plastics have become one of the most urgent environmental threats. These are too often buried in landfills or dumped untreated in our precious water sources. Even the manufacturing process itself has been identified as a major source of climate-warming greenhouse gas emissions.

As people of faith, we are not exempt from the overuse of plastics. Communion cups, nativity scenes and Easter eggs are just a few of the Christian staples that contribute to our single-use plastics issue. Bleyer Industries was once the only American manufacturer of plastic eggs, and at its height in the early 2000s, it was making 250 million eggs a year. It has since gone bankrupt because it could not compete with the cheaper plastic eggs coming out of China.

Major Impacts of Plastic on the Environment

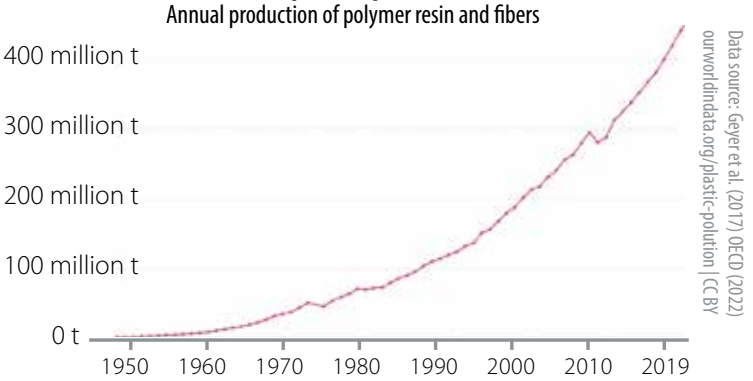
Plastic pollution damages habitats and interrupts natural processes, reducing the ability of ecosystems to adapt to climate change, directly affecting millions of people's livelihoods, food production capabilities and social well-being.

Our waterways bear the brunt of this pollution, which interferes with navigation and disrupts commercial and recreational fishing. Ocean wildlife, including birds, whales, fish and turtles, can easily mistake plastic waste for prey, resulting in consumption of plastic that can't be digested, which leads to starvation and eventually death. Infections, reduced ability to swim and internal injuries are also the result of this consumption of plastic.

Microplastics also pose a risk to human health.

Global plastics production

Annual production of polymer resin and fibers



Data source: Geyer et al. (2017) OECD (2022)
ourworldindata.org/plastic-pollution | CC BY

Increasingly we are seeing these particles, defined as any plastics under 5 millimeters in length, end up not just in the ocean and other water sources but also on farmland, raising concerns over our food supply and our well-being. **Some studies estimate that the total mass of microplastic particles consumed by adults corresponds to 50 plastic bags per year or one credit card per week.**[2] The chemicals in these plastics have been linked to a variety of issues, including reproductive harm and obesity, organ problems, and developmental delays in children. Ingesting these plastics causes cell damage, which could lead to inflammation and allergic reactions, and once consumed, removing microplastics from your body is not an easy process.[3] These health impacts are felt disproportionately by people of color and low-income communities, where exposure rates tend to be higher at each phase of the plastic life cycle.[4]

'Cancer Alley'

One vivid example of the health costs of our addiction to plastics can be found in the industrial corridor along the lower Mississippi, a region known to environmental justice organizations as "cancer alley." The 130-mile stretch along the river is home to more than 200 industrial facilities, including oil refineries, plastics plants, chemical plants and other factories that emit significant amounts of harmful air pollution. The situation has highlighted the reality that many of the petrochemical plants that contribute to the insatiable demand for products derived from crude oil or fossil gas, such as gasoline and

plastics, exist in close proximity to Black communities. People who live close to these production facilities experience severe health consequences, including cancer, organ malfunction, impaired sensory organs (eyes, skin), birth defects and many more illnesses.

Plastics and the Fossil Fuel Industry

While individuals around the world have started to realize the dangers of plastic pollution and take action to reduce it, the fossil fuel industry is poised to invest billions in expanding plastic production. Over 99% of plastic is made from chemicals sourced from fossil fuels, and the fossil fuel and plastic industries are deeply connected.

In as little as five years, these investments could increase global plastic production capacity by a third, driving companies to produce ever greater volumes of plastic for years to come.

"Fossil fuels and plastics are not only made from the same materials, they are made by the same companies," says Steven Feit, staff attorney at the Center for International Environmental Law. "Exxon is both the gas in your car and the plastic in your water bottle."

If trends in oil consumption and plastics production continue as expected, plastics will account for 20% of total oil consumption by 2050.[5]

Recycling Isn't Enough

While recycling has become the easy way to get on board with care of our shared home, recycling without looking at production and habits simply isn't enough.

Cigarette butts (whose filters contain tiny plastic fibers), food wrappers, plastic bottles, plastic bottle caps, plastic grocery bags, plastic straws and plastic stirrers are among the most common pollutants.[6]

These plastics can take anywhere from 20 to 500 years to decompose, depending on the material's structure and environmental factors such as sunlight exposure.

Less than 14% of plastic packaging is recycled.[7] With plastics being composed of several different polymer types, it is nearly impossible to recycle different plastics together as they melt at different temperatures. Additionally, to be recycled properly, plastics need to be separated. This is not only time consuming, but costly.

While our plastic situation seems overwhelming, our faith traditions give us resources to face this issue and change course. With all of this in mind, how does the church begin to address these issues biblically and theologically?

Microplastics are small plastic pieces less than five millimeters long which can be harmful to aquatic life and enter into the human food chain.

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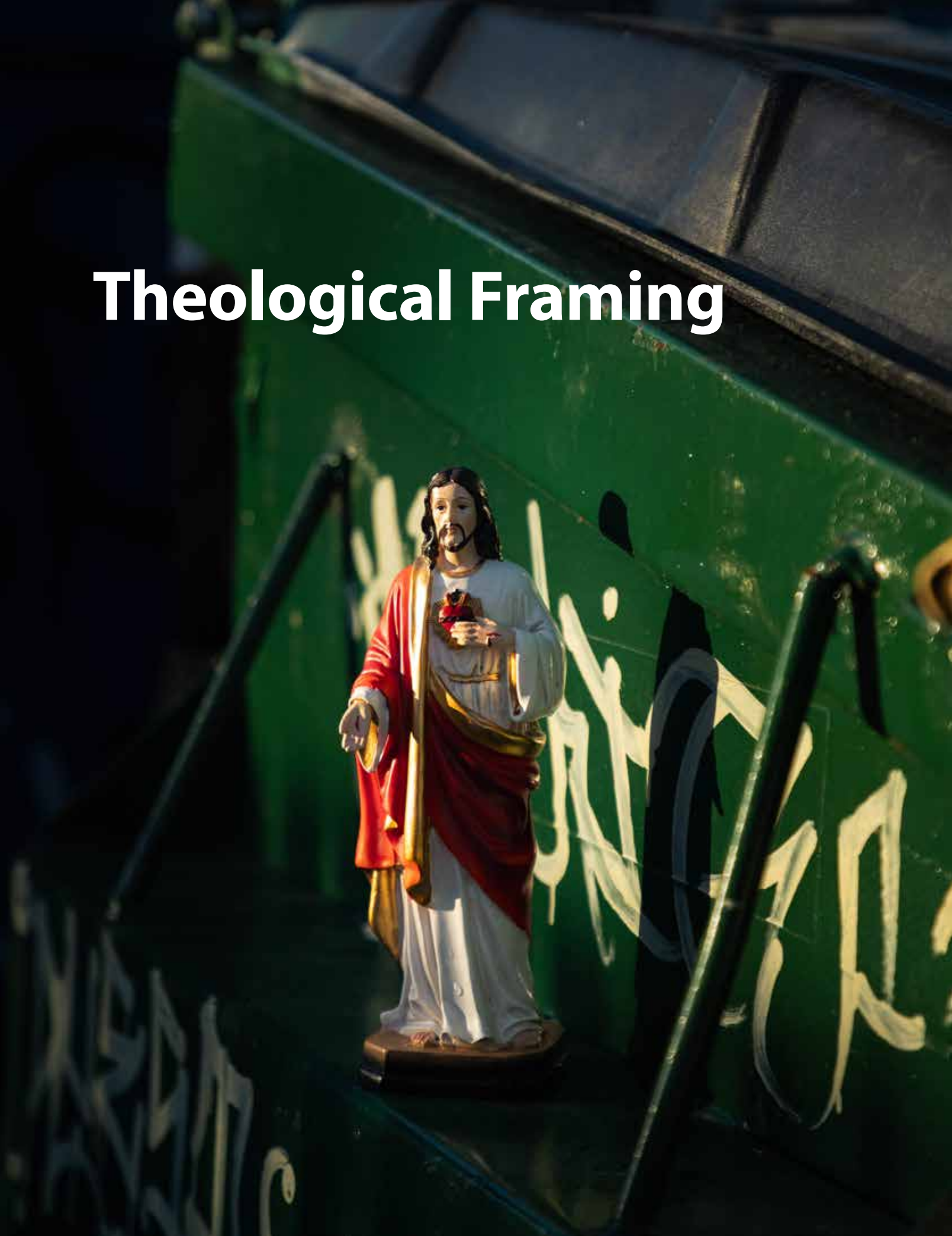
Theological Framing



Theological Framing

How strange to think that something so ubiquitous to our world as plastic would be completely alien to our foreparents in faith. It is a reminder that, as Dr. Ellen Davis has said, we in the present-day western world have more distance from the world of the Bible than any other culture in history.[8] That's not just in terms of time, but also in terms of technology, attitudes and disconnection from the non-human world around us.

Justice for creation requires a rethinking of our relationship to plastics. Is it enough that we recycle and find alternatives to single-use items to reduce the amount of plastic that ends up in landfills? How do we account for the fact that plastics are often produced in historically oppressed communities so that their very production harms the health of Black, Brown and poor White communities? Do we even have the means to remove enough plastic from our rivers, lakes and the ocean to preserve the bioregions made vulnerable by plastic waste?

If the Bible doesn't speak of plastic, how should we people of faith do so?

How do we address plastic's impact on our health and the health of the living things around us from a theological perspective? While plastic itself isn't spoken of, the human conditions that have led to our current plastic crisis are woven throughout Scripture. To speak theologically about plastic then is to speak of the human journey of sin, repentance and redemption.

Plastic Sin

A theological conversation on plastic has to begin with an understanding of sin. So often we think of sin as the individual acts of harm that are committed between individuals. And while this is true, we can't stop there. Sin is also the harm that communities and societies do to other communities and the vulnerable within their own and ecosystems have to be included in that understanding of "community." Conventionally we think of sin as the acts of harm that are committed between individuals. And while this is true, we can't stop there. Sin is also the harm that communities and societies commit against the vulnerable amongst themselves. That includes vulnerable ecosystems. Lack of intent does not equate to lack of harm. That we don't intend to pollute fragile ecosystems and neighborhoods does not absolve us from culpability in the damage that our oversized demand for plastics creates.

Our plastic sin comes in myriad forms but two that we will discuss here are idolatry and greed.

> I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.
>
> You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.
>
> *Exodus 20:2-6 (NRSV)*

A definition of idolatry is putting something into our lives in the spot reserved only for God. Wendell Berry writes "idolatry always reduces to worship of something 'made with hands,' something confined within the terms of human work and human comprehension."9 It's easy to see that part of what drives our plastic crisis is the idolatrous desire for stuff. From gadgets to furnishings to transportation, we have made the desire to acquire consumer goods an obsession of our culture. This market-driven obsession has led to dissatisfaction with anything other than the newest and best. Planned obsolescence is taken for granted as the price of doing business.

Enough is Enough

With discussion of sin must come exploration of repentance. These words of Paul, often quoted out of context, can be beneficial when placed back into context. It is widely believed that Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians in prison, chained to a guard and awaiting his execution. It is in that context that he writes:

> … for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.
>
> *Philippians 4:11-13, NRSV*

The superhuman skill that Paul has learned through all of his trials and tribulations is how to be content. This requires that we find new definitions of "enough."

It requires that we find our contentment somewhere other than in things. Again, Wendell Berry's words are efficacious: "The problem of our dissatisfaction with all of the things that we use is not correctable within the terms of the economy that produces those things.10 In other words, we'll not find contentment within the bounds of an economy that consistently tells us to buy newer, bigger and better. Metanoia, the Greek word that we translate as "repentance," means a change of direction. The metanoia that we need is both personal and economic. We need to move from consumption to connections with people, creation and God in our own lives, and in our economy, we need to stop putting profits over people and planet.

Eternal Life?

The promise repeated throughout the Gospels Christ followers is that of eternal life. We may argue over interpretations of what exactly that eternal life looks like, but we take comfort in the belief that some part of us is preserved in the loving embrace of the Divine far beyond the bonds of our mortal existence.

Less comforting is the fact that plastic has an eternal life of its own.

It's estimated that it will take a plastic bag up to 1,000 years to break down once it is in a landfill and even once it has done so, it lives on as microplastics that get into water, soil and the bodies of living creatures. Our plastic use today then becomes a legacy, a curse that gets passed down from generation to generation. Consider then that the call to love our neighbor is not simply to our neighbors in space or proximity, but also our neighbors in time. We burden our future neighbor with our plastic usage today, leaving them to solve problems that may have been avoidable.

8. Davis, Dr. Ellen. Presented at the Pastoral Care for Climate, Duke University Marine Lab, June 14, 2023.
9. Berry, Wendell. "Christianity and the Survival of Creation." *In The Art of the Commonplace*, edited by Norman Wirzba, 305-20. Counterpoint, 2003.
10. Berry, Wendell. "The Whole Horse." *In The Art of the Commonplace*, edited by Norman Wirzba, 236-48. Counterpoint, 2003.

Sermon Starters

Sermon Starters

These sermon starters are meant to be a resource to think about ways that our plastics issue can begin to be addressed from the pulpit. They are intended to be prompts to guide preachers into greater reflection on the issue while drawing connections to themes woven throughout the biblical tradition.

The New Golden Calf?

The Hebrew Scripture is filled with warnings against worshiping things that are made with human hands. The prophets point to such idolatry as a key thing that leads people away from both God and neighbor. The quintessential example of this is found in Exodus 32 when, in Moses' absence, the Israelites built a golden calf to worship, claiming that it was this thing that they had created that truly saved them from their enslavement. Plastics are a human invention that we often credit for much of what we consider to be progress in our society. And yet, as we look at the costs of extracting oil for its production, or the heavy toll that creation bears in its disposal, we see that we have turned our backs on the true source of life in order to chase after a false sense of achievement.

Exodus 32: 1-6

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf, and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord." They rose early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being, and the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to revel.

John 10:7-10

So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

Abundant Life?

"I came that you may have life and have it abundantly," Jesus tells his followers. Unfortunately, we seem to have confused "abundance" with "excess," and nowhere is that more obvious than in the ways we produce, use and discard plastics. The pervasiveness of single-use plastics has trained us to believe that the things around us are disposable and not to be cherished or preserved. The use of plastics to make things more portable, convenient and comfortable obscures the ways in which those same plastics have made the world less inhabitable. Can an abundant life be one where we continue to extract fossil fuels from the planet's heart? Should our abundance lead to waters that are impossible for fish and dolphins to safely navigate? Do the plastics we create give us a better appreciation for the abundance that exists in God's creation, or do they feed into the compulsion for more, bigger and better?

We Shall Not Want?

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters (verses 1-2)

Plastic, in both its production and its disposal, disrupts the pastoral image that the psalmist invokes. Still water and green pastures are replaced with toxic chemicals and oil fields. Places like "cancer alley" in Louisiana could easily be considered the valley of the shadow of death. The well-known 23rd Psalm paints a picture of a world where those who trust in God are cared for, protected and guided along life's journey. The opening suggests a person who has, because of this relationship with God, found contentment. Note that much of the author's contentment has some connection to the natural world: green pastures, still waters, a head anointed with oil, an overflowing cup, a well-stocked table. Perhaps what is lost in our plastic world is the recognition that the places that restore our soul are the places left untouched by human hands. Perhaps the invitation here is to recognize that creation gives us all that we need if only we are attentive to its gifts.

Plastic Jesus sits among the rubble of Hurricane Katrina in Waveland, Mississippi.
Photo by Alexandra Marvar.

Pushing our Limits

Rev. Caleb Cray Haynes

Genesis 11:3-4

They said to each other, "Come, let us make oven-fired bricks." They used brick for stone and asphalt for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let us make a name for ourselves..."

The story of the Tower of Babel is an ancient narrative that cautions us about the underbelly of unchecked technological "progress." After eating the forbidden fruit in Genesis 3, Babel is our next oldest Biblical record of the temptation to transcend our limitations. In the days of ancient Mesopotamia bricks were a revolutionary technology that was moving the needle of how far humanity can go. Plastics are the new bricks, and we've built this tower higher than we could have ever imagined. The ramifications of this are horrific as unpacked throughout this resource.

We find God in this text coming to save us from ourselves and the outcomes we've yet to see. God brings us back down to our appropriate and good earthly place through the gift of languages, which eventually gives birth to the particulars of place and culture, helping us be grounded in soil and community. Yet every time we return to building our limitless tower as an expression of "reaching the heavens" by our own power, captivity in Babylon doesn't seem far behind for the people of God.

Plastics have become the ultimate example of climbing as high as we can go. We began with, "Can we do this?" Instead of, "Should we?" In an age when we are reeling from the effects of a limitless pursuit of more, how might the people of God speak the language of holy limits?

Stories

Protecting Foodways from Plastic Pollution

When thinking of the Arctic, many cling to an image of pristine white tundra. This is far from reality. Research is confirming that the Arctic contains some of the most highly contaminated animals and people in the world due to the persistent industrial chemicals and pesticides that are transported on atmospheric and oceanic currents from lower latitudes. Much of this pollution comes from both plastic production and plastic contamination.

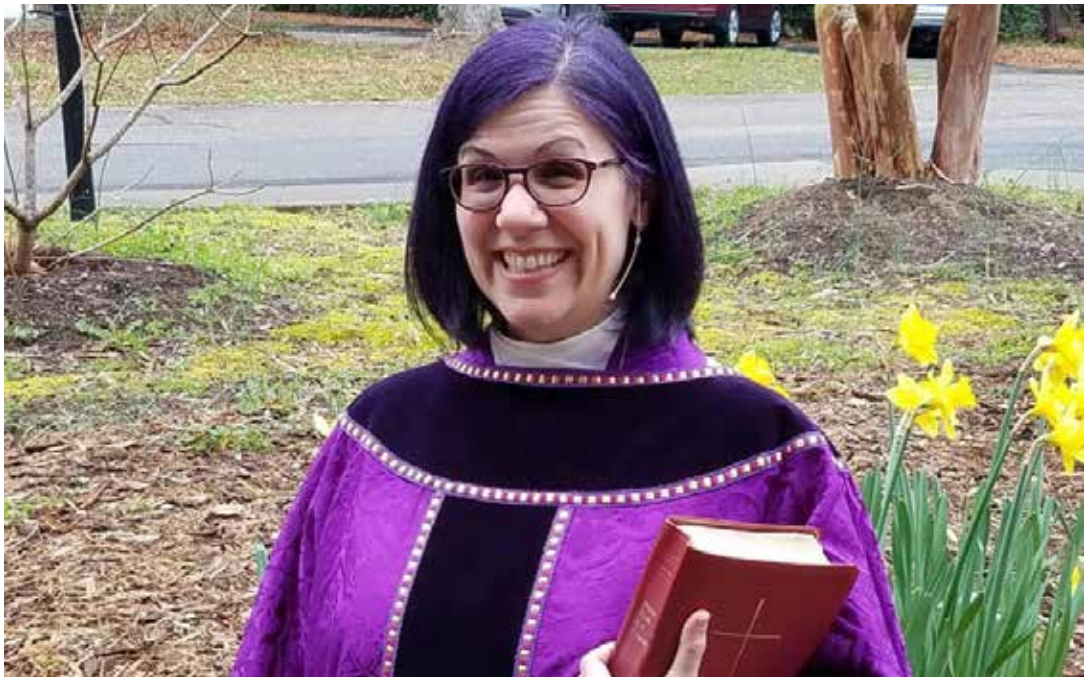
Alaska Community Action on Toxics (ACAT), an Anchorage-based nonprofit, is seeing growing awareness of the Arctic as a place of vulnerability and an increasing interest in concerted action.[11] They have been a grant partner of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) since 2018. The PC(USA) and other groups are dedicated to learning or relearning how to listen to Indigenous wisdom as they support climate change work that protects the health and well-being of our Earth, its wildlife and peoples.

The ACAT research team has been conducting community-based participatory environmental health research on Sivuqaq (the traditional name for St. Lawrence Island) for more than 22 years. Initially, ACAT's research collaboration began at the request of respected Savoonga elder and community health aide Annie Alowa. Annie, who died from breast cancer herself in 1999, witnessed health disparities among her people, such as cancers, thyroid disease, miscarriages, birth defects and reproductive disorders, particularly among the people who lived and worked at Northeast Cape on Sivuqaq, home to approximately 1,700 Yupik residents. One of the crucial pieces of work that ACAT is doing is making connections between these health issues and the fossil-fuel driven production of plastics in the region.

The people of Sivuqaq rely on a traditional diet of greens, berries, fish, reindeer and marine mammals for their physical, cultural and spiritual sustenance.

Sadly, the study of these foods shows how contaminants from plastic production carried to the far north by atmospheric and ocean currents persist for years and sometimes decades, burdening the region's Indigenous people.

The community-based research on Sivuqaq is guided by elders and other community leaders, and now includes eight universities working together with the tribes and ACAT, who train local people as community health researchers for the biomonitoring work. The research informs government decisions and aims to improve accountability of the fossil fuel industry. ACAT educates parents, teachers and health-care providers about ways they can reduce exposures to harmful endocrine-disrupting chemicals in their homes and environment. And the results of their research also inform environmental health policies at the state, national and international levels. ACAT organizes with community leaders to present information to policymakers in Juneau; Washington, D.C.; and in Geneva, Switzerland, at the United Nations. ACAT has also been active in the negotiation and implementation of the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs treaty), a global legally binding treaty to eliminate the world's most dangerous chemicals.



Rev. Stephanie Allen, former Rector, Church of the Nativity, Raleigh, NC

Zero-Waste Church

Church of the Nativity in Raleigh, North Carolina, historically prioritized creation care in its ministry, so the foundation for becoming a Zero-Waste Church was already laid. "This is who we already were," former Rector Stephanie Allen explained. "This was important to us, and so the question was 'how do we take this further?'" Allen and a small team began brainstorming. Inspired by composting and the concept of returning things to the earth, they came up with the concept of "Zero-Waste Church."

Initially, Zero-Waste Church focused on combating food waste, but they later expanded to reducing single-use plastics. Their mentality is that ecological processes *are* spiritual practices, and they turn this message to action through communication, education and evangelism. They also do advocacy, post resources on their webpage zerowastechurch.org and teach about how our actions directly impact the environment.

Zero-Waste Church's mission is heavily rooted in theology. Stephanie says, "Every person, every being has a use and has a purpose within the Kingdom of God." The concept of single-use plastics is inherently unchristian, disregarding God's intent for environmental preservation and contradicting God's doctrine of eternal life. The life cycle of plastics corresponds to the concept of life, death and resurrection — we shouldn't simply throw things away because it is easy. "Plastic is a sacrament for our god of convenience," says Stephanie, equating haphazard plastic use to false idols.

Churches and faith communities play a unique and important role in combating the climate crisis by tying together science and spirituality. With the increasing demand for congregations like Stephanie's to go zero-waste, she offered some advice for any church or faith community looking to take the same steps she and her church took. "Just start small," she says. "Start where you are, with who you are … choose three things; we've got a list of suggestions on the Zero-Waste Church page." Stephanie reminds us that any movement in the right direction is positive momentum. Nothing fancy or expensive is needed to move toward this type of lifestyle — just people who care. She adds that it's okay to be imperfect: "Jesus still loves you, even if you drink out of a plastic water bottle."

Actions

Actions

Personal

1. Try doing a plastic-free Lenten season or another extended season. Simpler ways to reduce single-use plastics are to bring your own reusable bags to stores and swap out plastic straws for metal straws.

2. Reduce shellfish consumption. Microplastics that end up in the ocean are ingested by bottom-feeding shellfish. When you consume the shellfish, the microplastics are then ingested by you. Reducing or avoiding your consumption of shellfish can help cut down on the amount of microplastics that get into your system.

3. Educate yourself on your personal plastic use. How much plastic do you use on a weekly basis? What happens to your plastic waste after you discard it? What percentage of recycling in your state is actually recycled?

Community

1. Reduce the amount of reusable plastics used for community meals. For example, use paper or bamboo plates instead of plastic or plastic foam.

2. Do a community cleanup in your neighborhoods or public spaces.

3. Donate to support communities impacted by pollution, such as Rise St. James in Louisiana. You can donate to their community efforts here: risestjames.org.

4. Advocate for your denomination or communion to completely divest from fossil fuel companies and petroleum companies, which are some of the largest producers of plastic products. One way to do this is to have your denomination support the Fossil Fuel Treaty, which you can learn more about at fossilfueltreaty.org.

The United Church of Christ (UCC) Resolves to Reduce Plastic Use

When the Rev. Dr. Bob Shore-Goss moved to Florida, he discovered that the Methodists in his new area had passed a resolution on plastics just a few years earlier. He reached out to Rob Grabill, a colleague in New Hampshire who had done work on previous environmental resolutions within the UCC. Those who have done work at the denominational level know that the process is rarely for the faint of heart, and even once a resolution has passed, there is no guarantee that the church will follow through. That's where Grabill sees a difference with this resolution. "The UCC Climate Justice Council has been working toward devoting itself to implementation," Grabill said. "This is going to be an opportunity, not just for the Climate Justice Council … we are wanting people to join this team and really expand."

The hope for this resolution goes beyond what congregations are able to do on their own, but also toward the actions that congregations can push for in the government. Grabill pointed out that the working groups that have been formed are "trying to focus on what practical policy or initiatives we can devote our time and energy to. … I have cultivated a relationship with Beyond Plastics, both locally and nationally, because this needs a national focus, and so we've settled on extended producer responsibility [a legislative approach that means holding the fossil fuel companies accountable for products even after they have been purchased] as one of the areas of focus."

The full interview audio is available at creationjustice.org/plasticjesus

Advocacy

Visit creationjustice.org/action for the latest advocacy opportunities.

1. **National**: Urge your members of Congress to pass the REDUCE Act, a bill that would put a fee on the sale of new, virgin plastic resin used to make single-use products. This could begin a wave of positive change, shifting industries to use recycled plastics or alternatives when creating single-use products as well as funding plastic waste reduction and recycling projects. You can find a sample letter below.

2. **International**: Advocate for the U.S. government to sign onto the U.N. Environment Assembly resolution to end plastic pollution and create the world's first global plastic pollution treaty by 2024. This legally binding agreement would address the full life cycle of plastic, from its production to its disposal. Additionally, this agreement would have significant implications for the economies of major plastic-producing countries, including the United States, India, China and Japan.[12]

3. **State**: Engage your state and local government to seek a ban on plastic bags. Currently, only eight states have passed a ban on bags (California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Maine, New York, Oregon and Vermont). Contact your local representatives and ask what action they plan to take to address plastic pollution and move toward a plastic-free future.

Sample Letter to Congress

Dear [Member of Congress],

As a Christian, I deeply care about protecting God's creation. Part of that caring for the Earth is to reduce the amount of plastic that we have released on the planet.

I urge you to stand in favor of the Rewarding Efforts to Decrease Unrecycled Contaminants in Ecosystems (REDUCE) Act (H.R. 5564/S. 2844). Plastics have found their way into every corner of the planet and have an impact on the health of humans, land, plants, water and animals.

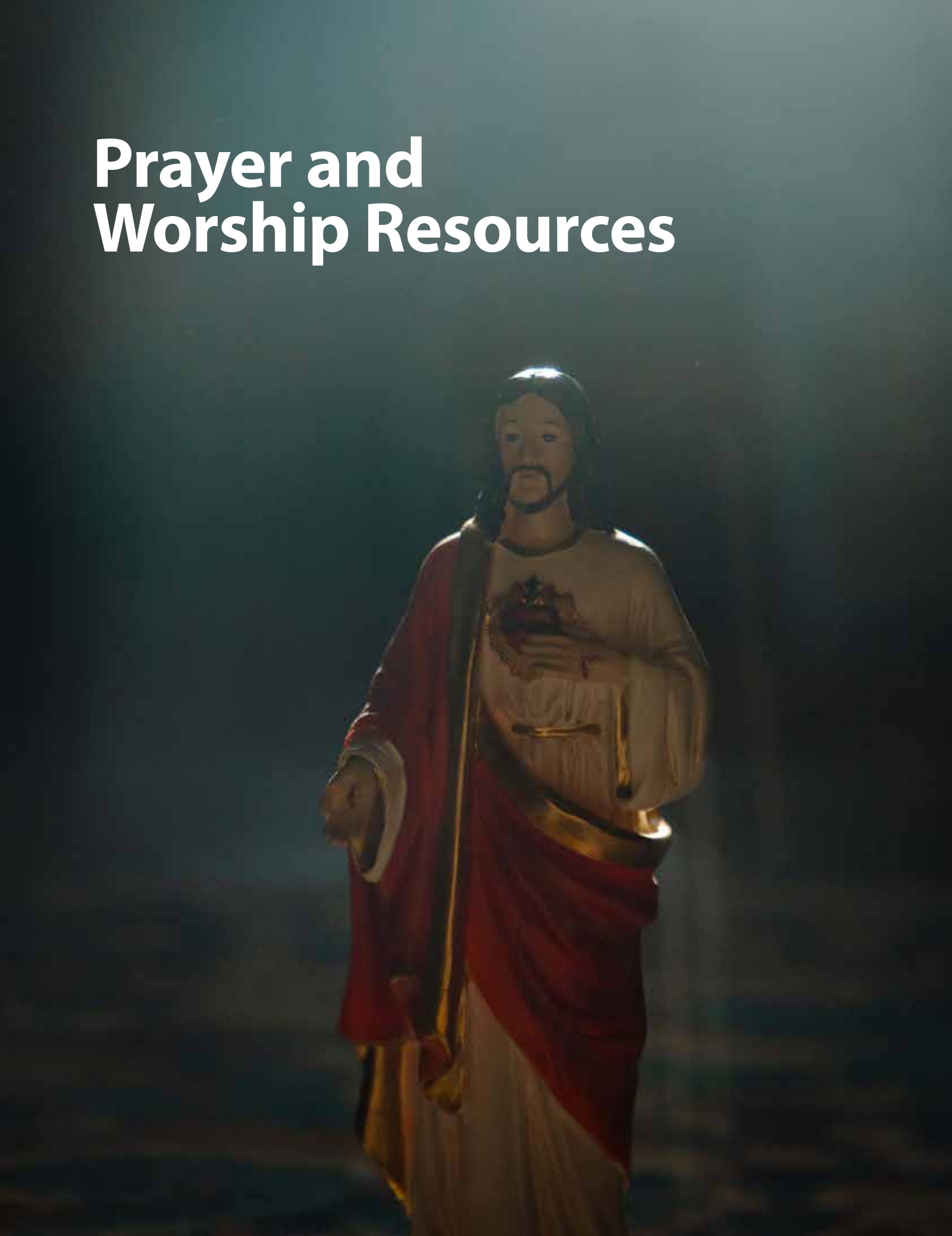
The REDUCE Act would put a fee on virgin plastic resin used for single-use products. By doing so, it will help shift our economy away from virgin plastics and toward recycled content and alternatives such as reuse and refill systems, thereby reducing plastic pollution, protecting human health and the environment and promoting the transition toward a more circular economy.

The REDUCE Act is a crucial first step to slowing, and then stopping, the unsustainable flow of plastic waste into nature and our communities by leveraging the power of the market to incentivize commitments to use less virgin plastic. I strongly support this bill and encourage you to do so as well.

Sincerely,

[Signed Your Name]

Prayer and Worship Resources



Prayer and Worship Resources

These resources are created for use across Christian traditions. We recognize that different traditions mean different things by "worship." In the spirit of ecumenism, we encourage you to use these resources in a way that befits your community.

Call to Worship[13]

We who too often lose our way gather today to say, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for (God) founded it on the seas and established it on the waters." And yet those same waters are polluted by the plastics we have made and discarded. We pause to ask ourselves again what it would it be like to see creation liberated and experiencing freedom and glory.

Along with all creation we wait for the glory of God to be revealed and we commit to playing our part, as the children of God. May we find liberation from our plastic addiction and healing for our land and water. Amen.

Call and Response

Scripture tells us that "creation waits with eager longing for the children of God to be revealed."

Creation is waiting for us.

To open our eyes to the devastation in our world.

Creation is waiting for us.

To put the needs of the most vulnerable above the greed of the powerful.

Creation is waiting for us.

To move from doing what is easy to doing what is necessary and right.

Creation is waiting for us.

To prioritize the needs of community over the convenience of self.

Creation is waiting for us.

To remove the pollution from our seas, land, air, bodies and hearts.

Creation is waiting for us.

In all these things and more, creation waits for us to assume our roles as its servants and protectors.

With God's help, we will answer creation's call. Amen.

Prayers of Gratitude

In the Word, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 reminds us to "rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

We know there is much to be thankful for, even in our plastic crisis. We acknowledge that plastic is a useful resource when used appropriately, as in many life-saving medical applications. We can also give thanks for the many people leading the way in tackling the misuse of plastic and uniting to take action to be good stewards of your Earth.

Thank you, God, for organizations that fight tirelessly for the betterment of us all. Organizations that honor Indigenous voices and wisdom as they do the crucial work of making connections between these dangerous impacts on the human, plant and animal health and the fossil-fuel driven production of plastics in the region.

Thank you, God, for the thousands of people worldwide who take part in plastic-free efforts, reducing their own reliance on single-use plastic and encouraging others to understand the damage plastics are doing to creation and our global neighbors.

Thank you, God, for the new global plastics treaty negotiations that are taking place during 2023 and 2024 and the opportunity to tackle our plastic crisis as a global community.

Thank you, God, for people of faith for whom love of creation and care for God's world is a core piece of their identity and their faith in the Lord, and who are using their creative gifts to reduce reliance on plastics and encourage others to bravely go against the flow of society standards.

Thank you, God for [any local work that your congregation wants to name and hold near].

The rising levels of plastic pollution that bring destruction to the oceans and their inhabitants deeply sadden us, and we recognize that it grieves our Creator. We give thanks for all the voices working and praying for the day that will bring real change.

Amen.

Prayers of the People[14]

If you're using this in a congregation, the refrain could be said by everyone, while the other lines could be read by individuals.

Creator God

Thank you for the many good gifts you have given us — so much beauty and abundance in creation all around us.

The earth is yours, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.

And yet we hear creation groaning and we have heavy hearts because we know so much of creation's pain is due to our actions. Forgive us for polluting the environment through our selfish deeds, without considering the impacts on people and creation.

The earth is yours, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.

Help us fulfill Jesus' call to love our neighbors and take action to look out for one another. We remember the people on the frontline of plastic pollution. We pray to you, Lord, that you protect them from the diseases and flooding that come with plastic pollution and that they may find comfort in you.

The earth is yours, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.

We pray that world leaders would act on plastic pollution, coming together to agree on an ambitious and binding plastics treaty. Give wisdom and soft hearts to those involved in the negotiations. We pray for each of the 20 million waste pickers around the world who do vital work. They collect plastics for recycling, and yet are often overlooked and underpaid. Let their voices be heard and their human rights and livelihoods protected. Oh, God, help us not to throw away opportunities to care for your creation.

The earth is yours, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.

We pray for the global church, for all the communities and people affected by plastic pollution, that you may keep them close to you. Help us to restore and care for this beautiful earth you blessed us with.

Amen!

"Doxastikon" from the Orthodox Vespers for the Environment

Almighty God, who created all things with wisdom and who watches over and guides them by your all-powerful hand, grant well-being that all creation may prosper and remain unharmed by hostile elements; for you, Master, commanded that the works of your hands should remain unshaken until the ends of the age; for you spoke and they came into being and they receive from you mercy for the turning away of all harm, and for the salvation of the human race which glorifies your name which is praised above all.

Songs

During the summer of 2023, six songwriters gathered at Sister Grove Farm in Van Alstyne, Texas, to develop songs based on our "Plastic Jesus" theme. The following three original songs are submitted with gratitude for the hard work and creativity of Ken Medema, Andra Moran, John Creasy, Alyssa Creasy, Bryan Sirchio and Beverly Vander Molen.

Recordings and sheet music can be found at creationjustice.org/plasticjesus.

Creation is Waiting for Us

Alyssa Creasy, John Creasy, Ken Medema, Andra Moran, Bryan Sirchio, Beverly Vander Molen

Ice caps are holding the flood gates
Melting with each passing day
Smoke from the wildfires now burning
Stealing our blue skies away

"Business as usual" mandates
Profits mean more than the poor
People at risk for erasing
Those on the margins pay more

CHORUS
Now is the time for a greater awakening
Creation longs for God's children to see
Beyond our fear, convenience and shortsighted greed
There is enough with justice and love
Together we can
Together we will
Together we must
All creation is waiting for us

There is a sacred connection
Deeper than all that divides
All things are stardust and soil
Strands in the web of all life

There is no time for deception
There is no time for delay
Holding and healing and saving
This is our challenge today

CHORUS

Fall in Love with the Earth

Alyssa Creasy, John Creasy, Ken Medema, Andra Moran, Bryan Sirchio, Beverly Vander Molen

Now we know creation calls on us to change
And the changes that we need will not be small
There are many ways we know we need to grow
And if there's one that matters most of all

Maybe it's as simple as this
It's time for humankind
To fall in love with the Earth

With the morning sunlight scattered through the trees
And the gentle wind that ruffles children's hair
And the noisy music of the flying geese
Surrounded by these wonders everywhere

Maybe it's as simple as this
It's time for humankind
To fall in love with the Earth

Now our hearts and minds must all be rearranged
And the honest truth is there is no easy way
Our economies and systems must be changed
Tomorrow's children count on us today

Maybe it's as simple as this
It's time for humankind
to fall in love with the Earth

Plastic Jesus

Alyssa Creasy, John Creasy, Ken Medema, Andra Moran, Bryan Sirchio, Beverly Vander Molen

Plastic in our culture is almost everywhere
in our food and even mother's breast milk
Carried to the ocean, toxically eternal
Disposable consumption in the landfill

Daily we make choices, choosing what's convenient
Swapping out the truth for quick solutions
But easy and convenient are like a plastic Jesus
Leaving Earth with permanent pollution

CHORUS
There's no plastic Jesus
who can teach us how to turn
Money-changers' tables over now
Give us Jesus, flesh and bone
Who understands our fear
Let there be no plastic Jesus here

We don't like to say it
It's nothing short of sin
Accepting anything that's doing harm
We disregard the impact we're making on the planet
And cover up our ears to Earth's alarm

CHORUS

Hymn Suggestions

- All Things Bright and Beautiful
- Out of Deep, Unordered Water
- The Earth Belongs to God Alone

11. Adapted from the article: Miller, Pam. "Partner Spotlight: Alaska Community Action on Toxics (ACAT)." *Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (blog), Nov. 20, 2023. presbyterianmission.org/eco-journey/2023/11/20/alaskatoxics.
12. cnn.com/2022/03/02/world/plastics-treaty-environment-climate-un-intl/index.html.
13. Some worship components adapted from *The Rubbish Campaign Prayer Guide from the Tearfund, U.K.*
14. Prayer by Jessica Bwali from Zambia.

Children's Sunday School Lesson

Preparation work and congregation involvement:

For several weeks in advance ask the children and the whole congregation to save and bring in washed/dried plastic containers, bottles, wrappers, bags, etc. Depending on how you'd like to approach this, announcements could be included in the bulletin and a collection container set up somewhere in the building or the children's church could be involved in collecting these items alongside the offering collection during service.

These items will be used for the activity portion of the lesson.

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Scripture:

Offer a quick review of the Creation Story before focusing on the text if desired.

Read: Genesis 1:20-25

Questions for Discussion

1. What did God make on the fifth day? (The things that live in the water and the birds of the air.) What were the waters made for? (To be filled with animals and for those animals to live and make more animals.)

2. What's currently in the oceans, lakes and rivers? (Various answers here depending on age, etc. Some may make this connection already, but if not, move to the next question to open discussion.) The oceans, lakes and rivers are also full of plastics. (Refer to the Plastics Island Graphic to talk about how much plastic is in the oceans.)

3. How does all that plastic get into the oceans and our other waterways? (They can come from a variety of land and ocean-based sources and enter the water in many ways, but it's our fault as people largely and that we are using more plastics than we can dispose of. Once in the water, plastic debris never fully biodegrades [disappears].)

4. What's the problem with all this plastic being in the water? (Animals get tangled in it and can get hurt so that they can't swim or eat. Or they eat it instead of fish or plants and it makes them sick. If they are sick, they can't live and do their jobs in our water sources.)

5. Do you think we have a responsibility to take care of the water? It's one of the first things God asked of us in Genesis 2:15: *The Lord God took the man (Adamah) and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.* How do we do that? (Using less will translate to less ending up in the water.)

Lesson Activity

Use the collected plastic items to create various ocean/water animals and scenes. This could be done as something small scale for kids to take home as a reminder to set in their home about making mindful choices not to use plastic or the animals/plants can be used to create a bulletin board/display for the church about plastics recycling/reduction.

Alternatively, these animal/plant creations could be used in a skit that the kids write and perform about the impacts of plastics on animals in the ocean.

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

Creation Justice Ministries
(formerly the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program) represents the creation care and environmental justice policies of major Christian denominations throughout the United States. We work in cooperation with 38 national faith bodies, including Protestant denominations and Orthodox communions as well as regional faith groups and congregants to protect and restore God's creation.

Our member communions and denominations include:

Alliance of Baptists
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
American Baptist Churches USA
Armenian Church of America
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Christian Methodist Episcopal Church
Church of the Brethren
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
Ecumenical Catholic Communion
The Episcopal Church
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
Mennonite Central Committee
National Baptist Convention, USA
Orthodox Church in America
Philadelphia Yearly Meeting
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Progressive National Baptist Convention
The Reformed Church in America
The United Church of Christ
The United Methodist Church

110 Maryland Ave NE, Suite 203, Washington, DC 20002
creationjustice.org