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Seeds of Change: How Young Adults in the ELCA are Cultivating Hope Amidst Eco-Anxiety

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During the last day of the 2024 ELCA Youth and Young Adult Gathering I (Paavo) suffered an intense spell of heat exhaustion. I would later learn that July of 2024 was the second-warmest month ever recorded in the city of New Orleans.[1] And yet, local Louisiana news focused on the positive, noting how the state fared better than in previous summers when it came to storms and droughts.[2] It turns

[1] "New Orleans dealing with record-breaking heat into the workweek", WDSU 6 News, https://www.wdsu.com/article/record-breaking-heat-lasts-all-week/44692297.

[2] https://www.nola.com/news/education/it-has-been-hot-in-louisiana-in-2024-but-not-like-last-year/article_c22de6c6-4527-11ef-9712-f338a2134a07.html (last accessed 1/31/2025).

Many young people today are concerned with, and working for the care of God's creation. Here two college students speak from the heart about their experiences in such work, and their hopes and dreams for the future. They challenge the church to see the world through their eyes, and to take appropriate action.

out, minimizing ongoing damage and focusing on society's ability to "manage the new normal" is an emergent strategy in journalism.[3] Bad news doesn't sell. But along with the 16,000 youth, young adults, leaders, and pastors I experienced the existential problem of a changing climate as an immediate challenge. And while these effects manifest in local ways, the experience of dealing with climate effects is commonly-held across places and communities. We're all readying ourselves for the next disaster.

As a unified body that spans time and exists within but beyond particular places, the church has a unique opportunity to present realistic perspectives on climate change while remaining ultimately hopeful about humanity's ability to prevent future harm. I got a sense of this in New Orleans at a workshop on climate justice. During the session, I met young adults working on behalf of the church to advocate for environmental policy in legislative bodies around the world and began to deepen my understanding of what real, systematic change could look like across a lifetime of purposeful, faithful work. These are the conversations that young Lutherans like myself long to have within the church. Affording youth and young adults opportunities to consider the deep and long work of climate justice is a key way the church can minister and bear witness to what God is doing in our world. In this article we, Paavo and Addie, will share bits of our own coming of age stories alongside recent research on young adults and climate change. In the end we aim to offer an (not *the*) ELCA young adult perspective on climate change, and speak to how the church can specifically minister to generations characterized by planetary uncertainty.

Seeds Sown: Growing Up Lutheran on a Warming Planet

Addie:

The first time I learned to mindfully appreciate God's creation was among Colorado's blue spruce trees alongside the Colorado River.

[3] Paul Slovic, cited in Geroge Marshall's, *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains are Wired to Ignore Climate Change* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 54.

Each summer I attended Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp for a week. For me and for many others camp provided an opportunity to connect faith with nature. Now as an adult staffer I've learned how camp presents children and youth with a different pace, time without the distractions of everyday life. Some of this is the programming, as campers spend most of their day outside hiking, rafting, doing high ropes, and playing games. But much comes naturally, through individual reflection and prayer in the beautiful natural spaces.

As a young child moments under the base of a pine tree near the outdoor sanctuary where I could look out on the Sangre de Cristos, strengthened my understanding of creation. Silly songs about God creating seas and the forests filled with trees (the hippos too, if you know the song) were an introduction to creation care because of the context itself. At camp I learned I was made in God's image and commanded to enact dominion, but the kind characterized by care rather than an abuse of power. Spending time in nature helped me begin to see humans' special responsibility.

Paavo:

In an environmentally-conscious Christian community, ideas of preservation, care, and restoration can integrate into a broader justice-centered theology. When I was a child my church's focus on the environment was invisible to me. In our hymns, we sang about Earth and angels. We prayed God would protect the water and take care of the sick. Our Sunday School curriculum moved from the Old Testament to pollinator gardens and back again. I attended a single church for the entirety of my childhood, so I was unaware how exceptional my congregation was. As a young adult, I now hold onto this childhood perspective as an aspiration for what the church can be to all people—a place where ministry, theology, and liturgy all exist as inseparably tangled expressions of each other. When I began to understand hymns, prayers, and sermons as products of choices made by my church leaders, I recognized the various ways my church was working to care for our planet.

At some point in early adolescence, I put together what I saw on the news, learned in school, and heard in church to realize how our species was irrevocably damaging Earth. The urgency for change began to develop. I recall chatting with a member of the high school youth group; she went with her Mom to protest the Dakota Access

Pipeline at Standing Rock and returned with stories and photographs. I was deeply moved by her photos of shared meals, people singing and laughing, and groups of people praying in front of heavily-armored military police. I learned a bit more about how water, energy, and sustainability play out on a distinctly political stage. I didn't have the language for it at the time, but I was beginning to flesh out a theology of environmental justice.

Recent Education & Formation

For the past year the two of us have been working with Professor Kiara Jorgenson of St. Olaf College on a book examining the ELCA's 1993 Social Statement on Creation Care.[4] We're seeking to better understand the history of US Lutheran environmental theology, especially after the general rise of public environmental concern in the 1970s. While some Protestant churches made resolutions and commitments as early as 1970, more denominations adopted official statements on the environment in the 1990s. Still, the majority of Protestant groups were silent on the matter until the 2010s.[5]

Work on the ELCA's statement, "Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice" began in 1989 and was officially adopted in 1993.[6] The statement is the result of two primary motivations: 1) an increasingly popular interest in the environment for its own sake, centered on the inherent value of nature; and 2) an emerging recognition that environmental destruction exacerbates social injustice. The statement's titular idea of "Creation Care" is woven throughout its three subheadings. Humans caring for creation (and being cared for in return) is an expression of God's "vision" for the cosmos. Rejecting fear and despair, our care is rooted in "hope," in the creative power of the resurrection. We enact "justice" through our care in this broken

[4] To learn more about Fortress Press' ELCA Social Statement series visit: https://www.fortresspress.com/store/search?ss=ReEngaging.

[5] In 1970, the Southern Baptist Convention passed a brief "Resolution on the Environment." https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/resolution-on-the-environment/ (last accessed 1/31/2025) and the same year, an ELCA predecessor body, the American Lutheran Church, published "The Environmental Crisis." https://resources.elca.org/theological-discernment/alc-environmental-crisis/ (last accessed 1/31/2025).

[6] The Social Statement is available at: https://resources.elca.org/theological-discernment/environment/ (last accessed 1/31/2025).

world where humanity destroys Earth, and by extension, our very selves. In our estimation the statement's strengths are its commitment to Biblical foundations, its emphasis on the hope of resurrection, and a clear outline for individual and church-wide action.[7]

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From a young adult perspective we also find the statement wanting in some critical ways. For one, the social statement is highly anthropocentric; it presents an overly-hierarchical model of the cosmos and neglects indigenous theological insights and methods of creation care. Secondly, the statement lightly touches on the connection of environmental destruction to racial injustice, despite the fact that many other groups were plumbing that through-line in the late 1980's and early 1990s.[8] What was our church's hesitation here?

In spring of 2024 our visit to the ELCA Archives confirmed our suspicions; children, youth, and young adults were not meaningfully consulted in the task force's drafting process. We wonder, would these shortcomings be less pronounced had young adults been more intentionally included? Even today we find relatively few opportunities for young voices to share in these important conversations, let

[7] Exactly thirty years later, the ELCA Church Council unanimously adopted a social message on Earth's Climate Crisis. Social messages differ from the longer social statements in that they address issues that might demand a more timely response than the statements' extensive drafting process would allow. Additionally, messages respond to more immediate cultural issues, while social statements seek to offer a broader theological perspective that can be employed across a longer span of time to address a variety of related topics. Access that Social Message here: https://resources.elca.org/theological-discernment/earths-climate-crisis-social-message/.

[8] The United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice published "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States" in 1987. This report directly motivated the University of Michigan's 1990 "Conference on Race and the Environment and Looking Toward the Future," and the UCC's Racial Justice Commission organized the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991. See https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ToxicWastesRace.pdf and https://www.ucc.org/30th-anniversary-the-first-national-people-of-color-environmental-leadership-summit/ for more information.

alone engage. More often than not the urgency which pervades many discussions of environmental decline leads current older generations to focus on problem mitigation rather than listening to and mentoring new generations of leaders. Yet our generation has come of age in a time of crisis. We have unique energies and capacities for creation care, born within the fertile space between the resignation to climate fatalism, apathy, and cynicism and impassioned outrage, concern, and activism. Not only should our voices be consulted; they should be central.

Young Adults & Climate Anxiety

As we live in a time of climate weirding, our generation experiences a unique emotional dissonance. We feel overwhelming helplessness and a deep sense of responsibility at once. This paradox is central to how we approach climate change and it results in high numbers of people who are at once motivated and susceptible to depression and exhaustion. This internal conflict can produce "eco-anxiety," a phenomenon that's difficult to separate from other sources of uncertainty that pervade the daily lives of young adults. This anxiety about the environment intensifies broader social fears and quietly compounds private struggles.[9] It produces a constant feedback loop, wherein increased helplessness makes resiliency and hope increasingly hard to come by, especially as we grow in the realization that climate change is no longer a solvable problem.

Ironically, eco-anxiety is often exacerbated by cultural narratives uplifting individual responsibility, a consequence of how the Internet facilitates social moments. As teenagers in the 2010s we watched as activists our age made their mark on the American public consciousness, while the connection of racial and economic injustice to environmental destruction became more widely-recognized. Like most people our age, our primary sites of engagement were YouTube, social media apps, and the Internet forums that serve as a central location for discussions and arguments on all topics. Motivated to combat hopelessness and resignation, the communities on these platforms present

[9] For more insight on this tension see Panu Pihkala's, "Eco–Anxiety, Tragedy, and Hope: Psychological and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 53, no. 2 (2018), 545-569.

an ongoing list of personal lifestyle changes and activism opportunities for their members. To a young person, the access to the expanse of political issues and the potential for what feels like "real activism" can present as intensely time-sensitive and ultimately overwhelming. We've learned, however, that these sites and their algorithms are not structured to incentivize real community action. Rather, they promote content that maximizes user engagement. So whereas activism appears to be a solution to eco-anxiety, it rarely provides relief, and often leads to the eventual exhaustion on the other end of a constant drive to action.[10] This repeated cycle of burnout can leave many of us young adults in a state of "eco-paralysis," which parades like apathy, but is instead the product of helplessness in the face of the environmental crisis.[11]

They ask us to better affect our immediate surroundings and the world as a whole. We hear the doom. And we're told to resist the gloom. These conflicting imperatives have complex effects on our young adult communities.

The ELCA currently considers anyone 18–35 years of age to be a young adult (which generally encompasses younger Millennials and older Gen Zers). These generations have been smothered by information about climate change. We know the damage is done. We also know the power to make immediate change is in the hands of the people least affected. We accept the inevitable—the irreversible effects of climate change will continue to mount. However, these same sources encourage us to seize the moment, and to amplify our individual efforts collectively. They ask us to better affect our immediate surroundings and the world as a whole. We hear the doom. And we're told to resist the gloom. These conflicting imperatives have complex effects on our young adult communities.

[10] For an exploration of burnout and the other Gen Z responses to climate change, see Britt Wray's, *Generation Dread: Finding Purpose in an Age of Climate Crisis (New York: The Experiment*, 2023), 111.

[11] Pihkala, "Eco-Anxiety, Tragedy, and Hope", 548.

Most young adults believe "climate change will affect their personal lives in the future."[12] According to a recent Pew Research study 78 percent of young adults (ages 18 to 29) think harm to people in the US caused by climate change will worsen in their lifetime.[13] Young people are more likely to take to social media and express feelings of betrayal by older generations or fear of the future. But, the "majority of young people in the United States are optimistic that it's still possible to prevent the worst long-term effects of climate change."[14] Many of us are focusing on what we can control. Some studies show that most of us believe we have the power to change our country.[15] As of this past election, Gen Z has roughly 24 million eligible voters and is the most diverse and well-educated generation yet. Overall we are progressive, pro-government, and view diversity as positive.[16]

What We Long to Hear: Climate Theology for Young Adults

Despite the prevalence of these concerns and the presence of optimism, most young adults have a limited emotional toolkit for dealing with climate change. We're discovering that older tactics fail to address the complexity of our experiences of this climate crisis. Whereas past generations feared the world-ending power of nuclear weapons, we arguably face a far more complicated apocalypse. It's a slower kind of death, more ambiguous. And while some potential for mitigation remains, in many respects humanity has already failed. It's easy to feel hopeless when you understand the many points of no return that passed before your birth.[17] And this struggle compounds with the narratives around us; our own psychology prevents us from

[12] See https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/young-people-are-optimistic-that-theres-time-to-prevent-the-worst-effects-of-climate-change.

[13] See https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2023/10/25/how-americans-view-future-harms-from-climate-change-in-their-community-and-around-the-u-s/.

[14] See https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/young-people-are-optimistic-that-theres-time-to-prevent-the-worst-effects-of-climate-change (last accessed 1.29.25)

[15] See https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/youth-are-interested-political-action-lack-support-and-opportunities.

[16] See https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far/.

[17] Wray, *Generation Dread*, 41.

experiencing the full weight of this crisis.[18] Our approaches for dealing with our realities aren't sustainable. They haven't been given the space and time that grief requires.[19] It's extremely difficult to grieve what is lost as you hope for what can be saved. But this challenge grants our generation an opportunity to proclaim a series of radical reconceptualizations for today. It calls our Christian communities to more intentionally craft spaces for nuanced and critical engagement, where young adults like us can find hope through our struggles to reconcile the contradictions we live.

First, young adults must be reminded of our own dignity as creations in God's image, a dignity we share with creation. When the world that surrounds us is consistently characterized as the victim of human violence, it's hard to view Earth as dignified and even more difficult to imagine how we might share in that dignity.[20] It can be challenging to believe that a battered, victimized world and its people are loved by a powerful God. Simple models of God's power and involvement in God's people's lives can no longer suffice for a whole world facing environmental destruction. This is why the church must proclaim the second essential reconceptualization, which is that countless groups across history have already lived through the end of their world.[21] From the Israelites who wandered for decades, to families and communities torn apart by war across human history, to Indigenous people displaced from their land, to the countless native species whose evolutionary homes have been destroyed, climate change is revealed as merely the next apocalypse in a world that has ended many times over. Our faith's stories remind us that God will always accompany the displaced. When our planetary struggles are reimagined in this way it becomes easier to imagine the new life proclaimed in the Resurrection. Churches should invite us young adults to see the shared experiences between communities across history, as well as the

[18] For a psychological perspective on how we respond to climate crises, see Geroge Marshall's, Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains are Wired to Ignore Climate Change (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[19] Wray, *Generation Dread*, 111.

[20] For a narrative model of youth ministry amidst climate change see Talitha Amadea Aho's, *In Deep Waters: Spiritual Care for Young People in a Climate Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 75.

[21] Wray, *Generation Dread*, 189.

greater connection between humanity's struggles and those of Earth's inhabitants.

Faith communities and church leaders can situate climate change in a larger binocular perspective, looking at God's love as a force that constantly overcomes the destruction brought by human sinfulness.

These reconceptualizations coalesce into a new perspective when it comes to our individual lives. Rooted in our faith in the Resurrection, our church can articulate a complex hope as it bears witness to the world's brokenness and its potential as the site for God's ongoing restorative work. This perspective is a sort of "binocular vision," a term that has been used since the early 2000s to describe the act of viewing climate change from two focal lengths at once. In this we can recognize the good and the bad at once, without obscuring the one or the other.[22] Faith communities and church leaders can situate climate change in a larger binocular perspective, looking at God's love as a force that constantly overcomes the destruction brought by human sinfulness. Christian traditions have always offered alternative stories to the mainstream cultural narratives, and we Lutheran youth and young adults across the world are embracing these stories and seeking change.

Young Lutherans Taking Action

Lutheran young adults around the globe are taking action to care for God's creation and combating climate change. 2023 Lutheran World Federation delegate to the United Nations Climate Change Conference Ole Andreas Grøtte Børnes of Norway, for example, spoke out against greenwashing and encouraged faith communities to play their part in protecting the environment. Partnering with 150 churches within 99 countries, LWF seeks to build a more just, peaceful, and reconciled world. One of its many focuses is climate justice. Since

[22] Pihkala, "Eco-Anxiety, Tragedy, and Hope", 561.

2011, LWF has been sending young adult delegates to the UN Climate Conferences. This commitment builds upon LWF's 1984 decision to ensure a 20 percent youth quota in all LWF activities. While the council publicly recognizes that "this goal has yet to be fully achieved," efforts to encourage youth voices continue.[23] The year before Grøtte Børnes attended COP 28 LWF sent forty youth delegates to COP 27 in Egypt, and prior to the conference LWF hosted several online workshops to train the delegates on climate advocacy. In response the LWF developed a Task Force for Climate Justice Policy focused on inclusion, diversity, and youth leadership. Philippa Hitchen, former contributor to Vatican Radio and a current communications officer at LWF, identifies that "young people are vital agents of change…" [24]

The ELCA values the global engagement of young people as evidenced through some programs dedicated to the formation and ministry of young adults. Lutheran Volunteer Corps (LVC), for example, places volunteers in a full-time service position at organizations across the United States. Notably LVC has partnered with the Urban Ecology Center, a nonprofit organization focused on educating the Milwaukee community about the environment. A second successful young adult program is Young Adults in Global Missions (YAGM,) which invites young adults into a transformative year-long journey in international service. Through YAGM young adults can gain opportunities for professional experience including work in environmental justice focused around agriculture, farming, and development. Beyond site placements, both LVC and YAGM emphasize ecological life skills for all participants with special focus upon simple living and mindful consumption.

Lifetimes of Ministry & Next Steps

Whether or not young Lutheran adults directly confront climate change in programs like these, all of us frequently interact with the environment in ways that are (and should be!) deeply emotional. Faith leaders have a unique opportunity to affirm and empower young

[23] See https://lutheranworld.org/news/task-forces-develop-policies-climate-and-intergenerational-justice.

[24] Seehttps://lutheranworld.org/news/cop28-young-delegates-highlight-need-action(last accessed 1.29.25).

adults in mentorship and through practical opportunities. Remembering the ELCA's 1993 Social Statement's commitment to uplift the vision of churches as "worshipping and learning communities," churches can reframe human relationship to creation by outlining realistic responses to climate change within clearly-defined spheres of influence, and intergenerational relationships can form the basis for this ongoing work. Generational diversity within our church communities offers young adults a much-needed opportunity to widen our perspectives, just as intergenerational connections invite us to imagine the scale of change that is possible across a lifetime of intentional work. An intergenerational community exposes the conflicting narratives of helplessness and personal responsibility, as each proves to be short-sighted and too inwardly-focused.

This change also encourages a movement past anthropocentric narratives of creation. Our generation must be able to simultaneously mourn what has been lost and recognize how life continues beyond what appears as absolute endings. The Resurrection that Christian traditions have embraced for centuries now enfolds a new meaning for a world distraught and exhausted by environmental disasters. Today's youth and young adults are bracing for a lifetime of destruction. Yet, our scriptural tradition bears witness to new life for a fatally-marked body.

As young adults raised in the ELCA we hope to see our church rise to meet its young people's needs, and in doing so move closer to fulfilling our calling to be the body of Christ on Earth. In this spirit we humbly offer the following suggestions for leaders to support and empower their young people for a lifetime of work.

- **Facilitate intergenerational conversation and mentorship.** Learning and healing will happen in both directions, and can encompass climate grief and much more.
- **Understand your spheres of influence.** Eco-anxiety thrives on uncertainty when faced with certain destruction. Explore what is possible for individuals and congregations on personal, local, state-wide, and national levels. Make these resources readily available to youth and young adults in your context.
- **Offer leadership opportunities in worship, service, and through community engagement.** Many youth and young adults have already spent time watching, reading, and

researching environmental issues. Give them a platform to share what they know and imagine practical applications to their community.

- **Listen to the people doing the work.** Many long-standing environmental organizations are turning their attention to climate change. Start local and look for partnering organizations. The smallest number of extra hands can make a difference!
- **Return to scripture with new eyes.** The Bible refuses narratives of inevitability. Environmental and climate-focused interpretations of scripture not only offer comfort when facing the current crisis, but help us pursue deeper connection with the Biblical authors who faced their own apocalypses.
- **Embrace the church as a center for communal education.** Religious language of "dominion" over creation has disordered our human relationships with Earth and with each other. Our abuse of nature is deeply intertwined with the systems of power that separate us by gender, sexuality, race, class, and ability. Our church must denounce these and recognize that the "power" we hold over Earth is an expression of our distance from God's vision for creation.
- **Embrace the promise of Resurrection.** As Lutheran Christians, we claim the Resurrection as a future promise and physical reality, for humanity and all creation. The Resurrection frees us to live out our daily lives, affected by but not impeded by grief, and empowered and held responsible in our hope.

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