

Praise for *Cathedral on Fire!*

"Brooks Berndt speaks convincingly with informed ethical expertise to awaken sleeping Christians and apathetic citizens to address posthaste the climate crisis. This is a book that touches the head and the heart while moving the feet to action. It should be required reading for preachers in the pulpit, people in the pews, and professors in the seminaries."

—REV. DR. J. ALFRED SMITH, SR., Pastor Emeritus,
Allen Temple Baptist Church, Oakland, California

"I'm grateful to Brooks Berndt for writing such an inspiring and faith-filled handbook for congregations on climate justice. With each chapter, people of faith are steeped in how our spiritual traditions are a springboard for action. Especially impactful are the discussion questions that deepen our own understanding of the issues raised, along with actions that move us from thinking about justice to living out justice in our communities and our world."

—REV. SUSAN HENDERSHOT, President,
Interfaith Power & Light

"For years, Brooks has been raising awareness, making connections, and accelerating the UCC's response to the climate crisis in a way that's inspiring and a model for the rest of us. This short book represents a clear, engaging and strong call to action, and will continue to make the UCC an important force in the religious-environmental movement."

—REV. FLETCHER HARPER,
Executive Director, GreenFaith

CATHEDRAL ON FIRE

a church handbook for the climate crisis

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*For my daughters, Danalyn and Kylie,
who are all the reason I need.*

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Cathedral on Fire

Introduction

God's Cathedral Aflame

A day after fire struck the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, a 16-year-old Greta Thunberg addressed the European Parliament. The timing added a new dimension to one of the central metaphors used by the Swedish activist to urge government authorities to action in addressing the climate crisis. Thunberg wanted the brokers of power before her to act as if their “house was on fire.” On that day, this compelling image not only came to evoke the house in which one lives but also the house of God.

For me, the cathedral also had an additional meaning that was perfectly fitting. As a pastor, I had once been inspired by the writings of the famous conservationist John Muir to give a newly formed outdoor excursion group the descriptor “Hiking in God’s Cathedral.” One can think of the natural world around us as one gigantic, grand cathedral evoking awe and wonder. Thunberg was telling us that this cathedral was now on fire.

Thunberg urged her audience “to switch to cathedral mode” and “do what is necessary” to address the emergency faced by the world. In a similar vein, the noted Canadian scientist, author, and activist David Suzuki soon extended the analogy between the Notre Dame Cathedral and the world. He noted how within one day wealthy donors pledged a billion dollars to help restore the historic building. He then noted that while he would not wish to diminish the emotional impact of the fire, it did give him pause. He wondered, “if we had a similar response of shock and horror at the death throes of the Great Barrier Reef, the toxic state of the Ganges River, the degradation of the Amazon rainforest or the rising levels of carbon in the atmosphere that gives us air, weather, climate and seasons, think of the responses we could develop.”

Thunberg asserts that the reason so many people fail to respond in a manner that corresponds to the magnitude of the climate crisis is because people simply lack the requisite knowledge, saying:

If people knew that the scientists say that we have a 5 percent chance of meeting the Paris target, and if people knew what a nightmare scenario we will face if we don't keep global warming below 2°C, they wouldn't need to ask me why I'm on school strike outside parliament. Because if everyone knew how serious the situation is and how little is actually being done, everyone would come and sit down beside us. (1)

While those who speak publicly about the need to aggressively act in addressing the climate crisis are often viewed as prophets of doom and gloom, it is worth noting that Thunberg's remarks point to an inherent hope in her perspective: if people knew the situation faced today, then their best nature would arise and become manifest in precisely the kind of actions needed. Thunberg and the millions of youth inspired to strike with her in the streets embody this active hope.

For churches to adequately address the climate crisis, a basic level of awareness is a prerequisite along with the kind of embodied hope found through taking action. Such embodied hope may not at first feel like hope. When one is rushing to put out a fire, one does not stop to ask, "Am I feeling hopeful right now?" Instead, survival instinct kicks in. An urgent concern for those in danger kicks in. A desperate desire to preserve a place we love kicks in. It is only in later, watching the video footage of those putting out the fire and those risking their own lives to carry out those trapped inside, that we are able to reflectively observe a remarkable heroism that inspires us all.

The Church is potentially the largest of the sleeping giants who need to be awakened to the fire that surrounds us. Once awake, this giant needs direction. It needs to know what must be done to put out the fire and rescue those threatened by its flames. In short, it needs a call to action.

Our First Calling

Faithful Curiosity

When my oldest daughter was five years old, she came to my wife and me in a fit of tears and extreme anger. She was upset over “the horrible picture” she had seen a few days earlier in her children’s Bible. We asked her to show us which picture it was. When we then pulled the book from the shelf, we soon found her pointing to a rendering of the crucifixion. It was a tough moment. At her age and with those emotions, there was no explanation that was going to reach her. All we could do was comfort her.

I have since reflected on that moment in countless ways, and one realization that struck me was how my daughter forced me to reconsider a central image of my faith in a new light. Despite all the sophisticated Bible study I have given to the crucifixion over the years as first a student and then a pastor, none of it had put me in touch with the visceral horror of it in the same way that my daughter’s reaction had. As I reflected further on this, I came to realize that sometimes—as challenging and as agonizing as it might be—we need to consider our faith with fresh perspective, with wonder and curiosity, with the honesty of children.

This can be especially true when a congregation considers the fundamental nature of its calling as Christians in relation to how we engage the climate crisis from a place of faith. There can be a tendency to think of the climate crisis or any environmental concern as just another issue that deserves the occasional sermon or perhaps an entire service devoted to Earth care. But might we orient ourselves in a different way?

From Occasional Issue to Continual Calling

While focusing on the climate crisis and our responsibility to God's creation for one Sunday a year is better than no Sundays, let us consider the calling of your church with fresh eyes. Imagine that you and every member of your congregation arrives at church on Sunday morning as if all of you are there for the first time. Further imagine that everyone present has arrived asking, "Why are we here? What are we doing? Why do this?" Everyone looks around at each other scratching their heads and saying, "What exactly is our purpose for coming together here?"

A welcome pamphlet in a reading rack by the front entrance suggests some familiar thoughts on what it means to be a church. It talks about how a-church-is-not-a-steeple, it speaks of its members as forming the Body of Christ, and it discusses what following Jesus entails. Various Bible passages are quoted in the pamphlet. For those assembled at your church, it generates some thoughtful discussion, and just when it seems like the conversation has run its course, one among your group says, "Since we are embarking on a new beginning, why not start at the beginning? Why not look at the book of Genesis in this Bible over here?"

Thus, you start reading the Genesis story of our planet's birth and the beginning of human life. You keep on reading, and soon your group gets to the second chapter of Genesis. You arrive at a part that encapsulates the very first purpose that humans are said to have had in Genesis. This immediately seems incredibly relevant to those gathered.

At this point, however, it is important to pause. In order to fully appreciate what comes next, it helps to take a step back and consider the context of what is being said. If you are truly reading the Bible with beginner eyes, then you would be reading about God for the first time, and it would seem that this God character in the book of Genesis is essentially a very powerful gardener. Genesis literally says that "the Lord God planted a garden" (Genesis 2:8).

All of this sets the stage for what happens with Adam, whose name is a pun on the Hebrew word for soil "Adamah." God breathes life into Adam, this creature of the soil. God then places Adam in the midst of the garden and tells him

his purpose in life—the part your group is especially keen on knowing. You then read about how God tells Adam that his purpose is to work and care for the garden. In other words, he is to work and care for God’s creation. Ah-hah! Here is the light bulb moment for your new church family. Could a central purpose for your newly formed community be to work and care for God’s creation? Could this be your first calling as people of faith? If so, then the severe threat to God’s creation that the climate crisis represents has enormous ramifications for our first calling as people of faith.

A Few Secret Ingredients for Community

Our first calling entails immense responsibility, but it is also a stroke of divine genius. Stop and think for a moment about just how much sense it makes for a church to have caring for God’s creation as a core purpose. Think about the wonderfully diverse persons who form your congregation. All of you have something in common in that you have decided to gather in one place on Sundays, but among you, there are likely lots of differences: different professions, different interests, different hobbies, different worldviews, maybe even different political party affiliations (as scary as that might be to contemplate!) Yet, despite these many differences, all of you share the initial gifts of creation: air, water, soil, sun, and the very plants that provide each of you with food. All of you share these things that you could not survive for one second without. It therefore makes a lot of sense that you would find a common purpose in caring for these gifts given to you by God, the Big Gardener.

Moreover, the fact that the Big Gardener has given you these gifts suggests that each of you in this newborn congregation also share a common spirit of gratitude. In this world in which there can be so much bad news, it is refreshing to think that everyone can come together each week to celebrate something that makes all of you grateful. After all, there is never a week in which you can’t be grateful for the air you breathe. Every week you can give thanks for the gifts of creation. Every week you can celebrate these gifts and offer thanks to the Big Gardener.

At first blush, this focus on gratitude may seem a bit odd

to include in a handbook for churches addressing the climate crisis, but let me assure that you it is not. The beloved French Catholic priest known as Abbé Pierre once said something that revealed how he was able to sustain himself as a champion for the homeless. He declared that we must always see with both eyes: one focused on the world's suffering so that we might fight against it and one focused on the world's wondrous beauty so that we might give thanks for it. In addressing the climate crisis as people of faith, it not only helps to see with *new* eyes, it also helps to see with *two* eyes: one focused on justice and one focused on gratitude.

Hard Work Made Lighter

The Big Gardner wants us to not only care about the gifts of creation but to actually do some work tending to the garden. We can't be free-loading couch potatoes. We have to roll up our sleeves and do our part. Yet, we are not just doing work for the sake of work or because of some onerous sense of obligation. The work grows out of our relationship with the Big Gardner to whom we owe everything. Thus, we arrive in the garden with a grateful, committed heart, and that makes all the difference in the world.

Work in the garden is made lighter because we are not doing it alone. In coming together at church each week as co-laborers with the Big Gardner, our undertaking is like that of a community garden. Such a garden not only needs community to do the work, it also builds community in the doing. I have learned the truth of this from experience. In New Orleans, a group of churches joined together to care for a community garden in the Lower Ninth Ward. This low-income neighborhood was hit particularly hard by Hurricane Katrina, and the garden developed in its aftermath.

I happened to be in town one Saturday when the churches were having a workday, and I was invited to come. The truth is that my initial response was not one of enthusiasm. I have never been much into gardening. I have trouble keeping the succulents on my office windowsill alive, and those things are supposed to survive anything. Nevertheless, the plight of my

succulents did not seem a sufficient excuse for declining the invitation.

Despite my reservations, however, I went to the workday and enjoyed myself immensely. It was not because I enjoyed picking weeds. It was because I enjoyed the company and the conversation. I had feared a morning of uncomfortable, dirty, hard work—and it was those things—but the time flew by. Those of us gathered got to know each other on a personal level. We told stories. We laughed. We commiserated. It was great. My life does not normally make time for doing that with others, but I instantly knew that I should make that time. Even better, the morning culminated at noon with the most successful community-building activity of all time: food. If one is going to work in the garden, one certainly has to enjoy the fruits of the garden.

Purpose-centered food gatherings point to another ingenious aspect of church life that should be seen with fresh eyes. The sacrament of communion can be seen as a cause for multiple celebrations. It is a time to celebrate the presence of Christ. It is a time to celebrate our common life together. And, it is also a time during which the tangible elements of our sacred meal give us cause to celebrate the gifts of the Big Gardener.

Problems in Paradise

Let's return to that group that has gathered to discern its core purpose as a church. You might imagine that everyone leaves the first meeting in high spirits as they come to realize their immense potential as a community joined together by a common calling. The next week everyone returns to continue reading and reflecting on Genesis. It soon appears that all is not right in the garden. Every garden has pests, and here the pest isn't a slug. It is a snake. Moreover, it would be an understatement to say that those who tend to the garden don't always get along. There are problems in paradise.

Today, many of the problems in our garden are often concealed from view. Like myself, many in our society do not literally spend much time tending to a garden. As a result, it can become easy to forget from where our food comes—the farm

conditions and practices. We can forget the persons who grow the food, how they might be laboring amid pesticides and amid increasingly hot temperatures that can threaten their health and even their lives. We can forget about how industrial agricultural practices and high-meat diets impact the climate crisis whether it is the destruction of rainforests for cattle ranching or the production of the greenhouse gas methane from cattle. In fact, a recent UN report estimates that 23 percent of human-generated greenhouse gas emissions in recent years came from activities related to agriculture, forestry, and other forms of land use.

At the supermarket and the restaurant, these problems become hidden. When one becomes truly aware of what goes on in the garden, however, one inevitably becomes aware of the injustices and the inequalities within it. One becomes aware of who has access, power, and control over the fruits of the garden. Matters such as race, immigration, and class quickly come to the fore.

The Irish Become Irish Year-Round

Just as a native of Dublin is Irish on more than St. Patrick's Day, a Christian true to the origins of the faith is not an advocate for God's creation solely on Earth Day or the Feast of St. Francis. Caring for God's creation has never been just another issue or cause. It is a calling that is fundamental to our faith. In our generation, it is also a calling that has become defined by the dire urgency of the climate crisis.

This calling inevitably connects with multiple issues of justice. The climate crisis is an amplifier or exacerbator of inequality. Those who have contributed the least to the crisis frequently suffer the most. They suffer from severe weather, melting snow caps, and rising sea levels. They also suffer from the harms to human health generated by the fossil fuel industry, the agricultural industry, and the auto industry. These harms range from the coal ash contamination of drinking water to the high asthma rates of children living near high traffic areas and major roadways. For such reasons, it is perhaps most accurate to describe our calling as Christians as not only about caring for creation but about seeking justice for all of creation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ❶ How do you practice your faith with childlike curiosity? What seems different?
- ❷ When it comes to church priorities and ministries, what do you believe are the implications of our first calling to care for God's creation? How do you understand those implications in relation to the climate crisis?
- ❸ How does your congregation relate to the joys and challenges, blessings and injustices, found in our modern garden today?

SUGGESTED ACTION—CULTIVATE GARDENS

- ▶ Through adult education sessions learn about the work conditions and environmental practices surrounding the food you eat as it makes its way from farm to table. Learn about the injustices as well as just and sustainable agricultural practices. One can focus on alternative practices by promoting Community Supported Agriculture, visiting farms and ranches engaged in restorative agriculture, or bringing local practitioners to your church.
- ▶ Pull carbon out of the air through the use of your church's landscape. Seek out local experts who can help you discern ways to do this through the planting of native trees as well as climate-friendly gardening which encourages the absorption of carbon dioxide through soils and plants. One can additionally check out the Union of Concerned Scientists' resource entitled *The Climate Friendly Gardener: A Guide to Combating Global Warming from the Ground Up*.
- ▶ Cultivate healthy communal practices during potlucks and coffee hours. Celebrate the local gifts of creation and practice what you preach through your eating. Eat food that is grown locally and sustainably. Moreover, eat plant-rich foods that model healthy eating for not only the health of your body but also the health of the planet. As one researcher noted, when you look at the evidence for what is a healthy diet for the planet, it is very similar to diets such as the Mediterranean and Okinawa diets that are already known to be healthy for our bodies.