

Dorothy Bass, Opening Remarks
ISM Congregations Project
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Like Christian worship itself, these three days begin with a gathering. They will end with a sending. In between, we'll share a series of encounters

with art that may help us see the world anew, as art can do . . .

with words—ancient language that can, when rightly used, hold our urgent concerns for today's and tomorrow's world, and with new language too . . .

with music made with our own created bodies, and with the wood of trees and the guts of animals and fossil matter and other created and crafted stuff, breathed into, beaten, and strummed . . .

with knowledge that stretches our understanding of the cosmos and our human place within it . . .

with practical wisdom shared by ministers and musicians and theologians and activists who are working to discern and embody faithful responses to the environmental crisis in their own contexts . . .

and with one another, and through one another the faith communities from which we have come—

across this region (Connecticut, New England, and other parts of the Northeast)

across this land (the South, the Midwest, the Southwest, the Northwest)

and across the earth (Ireland, Nigeria)

In every ecumenical gathering like this, the church is present in both its local and its global expressions. The church is here, arriving from particular communities in a whole range of unique places; and the church is here collectively, as a sign of the one church called from every land and nation by the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of us all. As we turn our attention to our love and concern for creation, this interconnected geography of faith feels especially powerful and important. Each congregation represented here does its caring for creation in a unique location on creation's dazzling, complicated map. And if we're like most people, those of us gathered here probably love some specific little piece of creation with special fierceness—the river running through a beloved city, a grandmother's strawberry patch, a certain mountain valley, a certain tree in the park. Awareness of environmental damage also hits us in very specific places—in the water of Flint, Michigan; in the wildfires of the West; in the floods of the Southeast. Creation comes to us this way, piece by piece. But you know, I know, and both theology and

science teach: all these pieces are connected at the core, alive only as they exist in life-sustaining relationship to one another.

Presenters at this conference will lead us to ponder all these things and consider our response. I look forward to hearing the presentations—and to the questions and discussions that will follow each one. But I also want you to notice that some of the best resources on offer here have arrived with you, the participants. Because you have been immersed in worship and service in your own communities, you bring profound experience. You bring practical wisdom.

During the last few days, most of you have responded to an online questionnaire—you know, the one asking for your contact information, your dietary needs, and so on. One question was different. It asked:

Is your church engaged in a specific ministry or struggling with issues related to the conference theme of creation care and environmental justice?

Yes, we are, many of you replied.

A few of your congregations host vegetable gardens—sources of healthy food for you and your neighbors, as well as experiments in sustainability and earth care.

Several of you have committees or task forces on creation care within your congregations.

You have fielded offerings in adult education. You are actively learning about connections between environmental justice and social justice. You are discovering new worship materials.

You have sworn off the use of non-recyclable materials, and you are making efforts to build and run your buildings with greater ecological responsibility.

In at least two congregations, pastors have recently focused their Doctor of Ministry projects on this theme, stirring rich theological reflection and creative activism in the congregation as a whole.

At least two others congregations are working toward certification as green congregations, in partnership with national earth care organizations. One already has that designation.

And this is just a beginning . . .

At the same time, I noticed that your responses also include another point, again and again. When we asked

Is your church engaged in a specific ministry or struggling with issues related to the conference theme of creation care and environmental justice?

Many of you answered “No, but we want to be.” We know it’s important, but we haven’t begun serious efforts, many of you wrote. We want to do more. But it’s hard.

Listening to many congregations—including my own, a medium sized Lutheran congregation near Chicago—I pick up a sense that many of us feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of this issue. This topic, this challenge, this cosmos: we care so much, but these things are so big, and we are so late with our attention.

It’s easy to feel overwhelmed by the challenge and the need of a damaged environment at this moment in earth’s history. Yet as we dwell together for three days, united by our love for creation and our longing for its well-being, I urge you to notice other overwhelmings as well.

Art, overwhelming our preconceptions and moving us to new vision.

Music, overwhelming our bodies and luring us to unplug our ears and listen to the other creatures with whom we share in the web of life.

Worship, overwhelming our defenses and summoning us to take off the blinders of custom and disregard.

New knowledge, overwhelming our ignorance and our stuckness.

The overwhelming that is creation itself, in all its intricate beauty. (Look out the window, and also look at the amazing creature sitting right next to you in the place.)

And the overwhelming that is God, calling us again into God’s own care for this created world that is God’s love and God’s delight, and promising a new creation, for us and for all.

Yes, we are overwhelmed as we take up this theme. May the Holy One be praised.