

The Creation Stewardship Listening Project: Conservative Churches Provide Guidance on Local Creation Care in Yancey County, North Carolina

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to present a successful model program that enables conservative and moderate church leaders to help define, develop and act on a local faith based approach to stewardship of God's creation. That model includes: 1. The Christian Stewardship Listening Project (CSLP) (2) Local organizations conducting Christian Stewardship of Creation (CSC) education and action programs after receiving guidance and integrating new church leadership from CSLP.

CSLP provides a means of in-depth, deep listening interviews with church leaders. This occurs in a manner that enables those interviewed to reclaim and define stewardship of God's created earth, from a local, biblical perspective.

Reviewing and reflecting on the results of CSLP interviews with church leaders can then result in the development of a Christian Stewardship of Creation organization, with many of the leaders being pastors, deacons, educators and others who were interviewed by CSLP. This CSC organization engages in education and action on behalf of God's creation -- action that comes not from outside the community but from local churches.

This article presents one successful CSLP/CSC project in Yancey County in North Carolina, which may stand as a model for similar projects throughout the U.S.

Yancey County is a mountain community in western North Carolina with two primary mountain-fed watersheds and hundreds of creeks and streams. In the past ten years, Yancey County has experienced rapid land development that has included building on steep slopes and ecologically sensitive mountaintops. Among other things, this is affecting water quality and availability which is also being impacted by pesticide contamination, sewage system problems, and the fact that some existing homes still straight-pipe their human waste into mountain streams. Past efforts to address environmental concerns have often failed due to organized opposition from residents who have very strong feelings about environmentalism.

Yancey is also the home of RSVP, a non-profit that has for the past 25 years provided training and resources that enable community organizations, public and non-profit service agencies, and religious organizations to conduct Listening Projects throughout the U.S. A Listening Project (LP) includes "deep listening" interviews that enable local residents to share their thoughts, feelings concerns and possible solutions on difficult or polarizing issues. They have been used in creating greater citizen input and involvement that leads to successful community education and action on a wide range of community issues and concerns. Many Listening Projects have been successful in both rural and major urban communities. Successful

projects have also addressed conflict, reconciliation and community development in Serbia, Croatia, Palau and Nicaragua. For further info: (www.listeningproject.org).

The Christian Stewardship Listening Project (CSLP) was initiated in 2008 by people from several Yancey county churches who were concerned about depletion and destruction of our local environment which is God's creation. With guidance and training from RSVP, this group of Christians planned and then conducted in depth interviews with 28 Yancey church leaders -- primarily from churches that had been dis-engaged, suspicious or negative about "environmentalism." CSLP's goal was not to hear what we might want to hear. Rather, we asked questions and listened with open hearts and minds as some of Yancey County's church leaders reflected on stewardship of our natural resources which are God's creation.

Each interviewee was asked 21 open-ended questions about matters of faith and stewardship of the earth as God's creation. Given the fact that the vast majority of churches are conservative (most being Baptist denominations), a large majority of interviews were with pastors and lay leaders from such churches. A scribe accompanied each interviewer, providing us with a written summary of every interview. This enabled us to review all responses so we could learn from them and incorporate what we learned into ongoing listening, education and action that benefit our churches, our community and stewardship of God's creation.

Faith-based Concerns and Home-Grown Solutions

Though we were interviewing people who often had negative or suspicious feelings about environmental issues, all of our interviews were positive and often even inspiring to the interviewers. One reason for this is that we came not as advocates with an agenda, but as fellow Christians and as listeners who sincerely wanted to find out the concerns, hopes, and priorities of the people we interviewed. We didn't tell people the meaning of Creation stewardship—we asked them to tell us the meaning they found in those words, speaking from their own faith and life experiences. In this way, each person we interviewed helped us define Creation stewardship in Yancey County. Other reasons for our success include:

- (1) Interviews are conducted by Christians trained in deep listening which requires empathy and respect for the person interviewed, and other skills that enable the interviewee to enter into deeper levels of self-reflection.
- (2) Interviews, which generally last about an hour, were guided by a well thought out series of questions that enable a gradual but deepening level of reflection on concerns and fears as well as hopes and solutions. Follow-up questions that come from the interviewers can also lead to thoughts and ideas that come from deep reflection.
- (3) The hour length of the interviews and a purposeful ordering of the questions allowed adequate time for:
 - (a) Building trust between the interviewer and interviewee
 - (b) Beginning with simple, affirming questions that provided an easy entry into complex issues as well as a spacious opportunity for serious reflection on difficult or divisive matters
 - (c) Asking interviewees for their ideas, beliefs, suggestions and solutions. This included time for interviewees to express concerns about environmentalism.
 - (d) Providing an opportunity for the interviewees to consider participation in follow-up discussion/s or engagement with the issue/s.

In many instances Yancey church leaders had never before encountered the concept of creation stewardship. They were clearly grateful to have a faith based alternative to secular environmentalism. Pastors who had heard of creation stewardship were very appreciative for the opportunity for in-depth reflection and discussion on its meaning and on how it can be applied personally, within the church and the local community.

The following is a small sampling of responses we heard during our interviews:

- I remember when there were plenty of springs you could drink from. You didn't worry about what was on top of the mountains. Now many springs are gone. The mountaintops are covered with houses. The land is logged till everything is gone. I grew up logging . . . we were careful . . . we didn't take everything. Now they cut everything and there is no concern that the water will dry up without the trees.
- We've always understood this land because we made our living from the land, and people know you don't cut your own throat by abusing what you need.
- If we don't steward the land, so many of the experiences that I enjoyed growing up here are going to be totally gone for future generations.
- A large part of being a Christian is a feeling of wonder and awe for Creation as a gift from God. Christian worship should be a part of our wonder. We must respond with gratitude and by being good caretakers.
- Genesis mandates that to govern as stewards is for all of us. Sometimes we make fun of "tree huggers" when we as Christians should be the ones supporting and leading the way.
- There is no reason why we can't simultaneously have good jobs and protect God's creation. We need to find the right balance and continue working toward economic development that is good for both the people and the environment.
- The Bible says that God created the earth and it was good. So if He hadn't cared about it, He wouldn't have created it. Then Satan comes in and he says: "Well, the only way to hurt God is to hurt what he cares about." So he's going to hurt God's creation whether it be you and I, whether it be the animal kingdom or this earth. I believe it's a plan that he works both through the minds of people and through anything he can use."

Our listening also enabled us to identify barriers to change. One key barrier was well expressed by Pastor Frank Wyatt of Liberty Covenant Church:

"I think because environmental matters have sometimes done wrong without enough regard for the people it affects, some people react to anything environmental and throw the baby out with the bath water. In other words, they react to anything environmental even when really some things need protection. I remember when I was young things got pretty bad here. Some of the pit mines really left a mess, and the South Toe River was brown with scummy foam. It was really polluted. I'm glad it was cleaned up. I want the clean water here for my children and grandchildren. But you can't just legislate; you have to involve the people."

Interviews with Pastor Wyatt and others identified the need for increasing community participation in determining the environmental priorities and initiatives that affect people's lives.

Many also identified the need for people to be better informed. When asked if churches could play a role in informing and educating people, most church leaders said yes.

From Listening to Education and Action

CSLP interviews revealed a local, grassroots, Christian approach to environmental cares and concerns. The church leaders who were interviewed were grateful to have a bible based approach to dealing with concerns for our mountain lands and waters. They were also willing to identify their priorities for creation stewardship in Yancey County.

A Listening Project does not conclude once the interviews results have been reviewed. Listening Projects are designed to open doors that enable the LP organizers to apply what they have learned from the interviews, to church and community education and action that can result in stronger faith and communities.

Faith Based Education

At the conclusion of our interviews, CSLP released to the public a summary of the results of our interviews. This was done in a series of articles in our local paper and in a regional Christian publication. Interviewees had been told that their specific responses would not be quoted to the public unless we requested and received permission to quote them. All who were asked agreed to being quoted. In addition several pastors agreed to be interviewed a second time and to be featured in an article in the local paper.

Environmental issues are usually controversial in Yancey County, but there were only positive responses to our articles because residents could easily identify with CSLP's local, faith-based approach to creation stewardship. This included concern for our people and communities as well as creation care. Thus CSLP's media work enabled a much larger audience to reflect on a model of creation stewardship that came from respected, primarily conservative church leaders.

Outreach to our churches continued as we expanded our listening through **Facilitated Group Listening (FGL)** in several churches. This enabled church members to come together in their own church to reflect and share with one another their feelings and ideas on creation stewardship. FGL is another program of RSVP / Listening Project. The structure of an FGL session includes a *primary facilitator* who facilitates the large group that gathers at the beginning and the end of the listening sessions. Between these two large group gatherings, the listening occurs in smaller groups of 3 to 4 as each participant has roughly equal time to respond to questions that enable them to express concerns, thoughts, feelings and priorities for creation stewardship in home, church and community. To provide each participant with a safe place to express their feelings without being judged or criticized by others, the listening and dialogue groups are guided by *small group facilitators*. Before the listening session begins, all participants are asked to make a verbal contract that commits them to honoring the FGL dialogue rules that protect and affirm each participant's right to be heard and respected. Participants are informed that while they don't have to agree with what someone says, they should not judge or criticize people. Instead they can: 1. Empathize (walk in others shoes) and seek common ground 2. Speak their own truth while others can do the same.

FGL sessions in Yancey County were offered as “**Prayer, Dialogue and Reflection on Stewardship of God’s Creation.**” They were very well received by those who participated. For many it was their first experience in identifying with creation stewardship as part of their faith. These “Prayer Dialogue and Reflection” sessions also increased input from our faith community into identifying priorities for creation care in our county. Once again, issues of water protection and problems associated with rapid land development rose to the forefront of people’s priorities.

Faith Leads to Action

Several of the church leaders who were interviewed agreed to join an eleven member CSLP leadership team. This led to the creation of a new organization - Christian Stewardship of Creation (CSC). Yancey CSC continues today to speak out and act on behalf of Bible based creation stewardship.

Initial Yancey CSC Accomplishments Include:

1. Engaging churches in Adopt-A-Stream which helps protect the French Broad River Basin
2. Helping churches get free energy audits that have enabled them to save money and waste less energy
3. Identifying applicants within local churches for low-income family home weatherization provided by our local community action agency.
4. Providing support for a sewage system in the eastern part of the county which will, when completed, enable sustainable business development there.
5. Conducting a Christian youth day long gathering that has enabled students from both the public high school and the Tri-County Christian School to embrace Stewardship of God’s Creation as an important part of their faith.
6. Under the guidance of their principal, who also serves as the local CSC coordinator, students at Tri-County Christian School have participated in several environmental education and action programs.
7. In early 2010, CSC, with the help of the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina, founded a second organization, **Sustainable Yancey (SY).**

Sustainable Yancey

The founding of Sustainable Yancey by CSC was in response to the fact that many people wanted a “sensible,” local approach to creation care that took into account the needs of local working people and families. That is exactly what “sustainable development” is - **development that avoids destruction of our natural resources which are essential to community health; and development that creates long lasting (sustainable) economic opportunities for ourselves, our community and future generations.**

SY leaders include pastors, local government officials, two community college leaders, business owners, a former and current director of the Economic Development Commission, and others. SY has thus far been able to find strong local support for sustainable development. Local government and other civic officials as well as workers and business owners have come together through the organization to develop priorities, strategies, and plans for sustainable development.

Priorities established by the Christian Stewardship Listening Project have influenced SY programs.

The following is a list of SY accomplishments thus far:

1. Influenced county government to create a new watershed protection board and begin work on creating stronger county watershed regulations
2. Assisting the Yancey Small Town Economic Prosperity project that has determined priorities for a \$100,000 Rural Center grant to be awarded to the town of Burnsville.
3. Provided support for approval and construction of a new East Yancey sewer district.

The following is Ongoing SY work as of September 2011:

1. Partnering with the county Extension Office on:
 - a) A farm outreach project that will enable local farms to participate in a Voluntary Agricultural Districting program that offers farm tax relief and farmland protection.
 - b) Developing and utilizing an agricultural cooperative marketing and resource center for farmers. SY's initial work will be outreach to farmers who are suspicious of government agriculture programs.
2. Providing local entrepreneurs with access to local resources. For example one such entrepreneurial effort involves a new textile design and product development company that will provide work for local artisans, designers, seamstresses, office staff etc. This business already has clients ready to be served.
3. Working with Yancey Economic Development Commission and other local organizations to fund and oversee an SY initiated "Buy Local Campaign." This campaign will enable a full time staff person to oversee three campaign components: 1) Local business promotion 2. Providing training and resources to new and existing web based businesses 3) A community investment fund that can be available to local entrepreneurs and businesses.
4. Working with state and local officials and local industries in a Toecane Rivers restoration project.

Conservative Churches Can Lead the Way To Creation Stewardship

While there is a growing body of churches and Christian organizations that advocate for creation stewardship, the mistrust and polarization of "environmentalism" continues to be a major barrier to conservative and many moderate churches leading the way to creation stewardship.

Reclaiming our bible based duty to speak and act on behalf of God's creation requires that we provide opportunities for prayer, reflection and action that reflect the beliefs and priorities of conservative and moderate churches. CSLP / CSC provide a model for achieving this through grassroots church listening, education and action. While this is only one successful model of this work, there is also a twenty year history of churches using Listening Projects and Facilitated Group Listening to bring about positive, community based change throughout the U.S. and

internationally. For example, churches in Atlanta, Birmingham and Columbia, S.C. utilized Listening Projects to organize and act on behalf of refugees from Hurricane Katrina. In the Republic of Croatia which was ravaged by ethnic warfare in the early 90's, post-war reconciliation and community development was made possible by Listening Projects in seven deeply polarized cities and towns throughout the country. A church lead Facilitated Group Listening between Croatian Catholics and Orthodox Serbs also lead to reconciliation between enemies.

Christian church and community organizations interested in the possibility of a Christian Stewardship Listening Project and Christian Stewardship of Creation are invited to contact RSVP/Listening Project. At present the George Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability (GIBS) in a triangular (TRINITY-based) collaboration with Open Door Baptist Church (ODBC) and the L. Russ Bush Center for faith and Culture of the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS) is significantly modifying the CSLP model for use in their current effort in an urban environment in the triangle area to address concerns about development of Falls Lake watershed which provides drinking water to Raleigh and other towns in wake County. This "theoecology project" (www.theoecologyproject.org) is being led by Dr. Robert Y. George, Professor of Science, Policy and Faith at the L. Russ Bush Center for Faith and Culture, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC.

For further information about Christian Stewardship Listening Project training and consultation, or development of a Christian Stewardship of Creation organization in your community, contact: Herb Walters, Director, RSVP / Listening Project: hwalters@yancey.main.nc.us or go to www.listeningproject.org.

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