People are often surprised to find out that the U.S. Forest Service has an urban field station in New York City. This comparatively small team of researchers has kept a detailed log of every entity who contributes to sustaining the Big Apple’s urban canopy. Their records show that there are thousands of organizations, primarily volunteer-led with annual budgets of less than $1,000, that care for the green infrastructure of the city, underused public space between buildings, vacant lots, and in roadway medians that have become the city’s pocket parks, community gardens, and urban farms.

In 2009, I started an organization with two friends from the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies to support these small, volunteer actions that make neighborhoods sunnier, greener, and nicer places to live. That organization is called “ioby,” its name derived from the opposite of NIMBY (Not in My Backyard): in our backyards.

ioby supports citizen-led, neighbor-funded projects that make stronger, more sustainable neighborhoods. ioby is for people who say, “Yes! I want to make some positive change in my neighborhood!” One of our founding principles is that residents of a community know what’s best for the neighborhood. They are best equipped to create, implement, and steward local solutions.

We designed a platform for people to bring their ideas to life. Since we started, we’ve supported the transformation of more than 50 vacant lots into urban farms. More than 70 ioby leaders have created
ABOUT US
Earth Ministry engages the religious community in environmental stewardship. We work in partnership with individuals and congregations to respond to this great moral challenge through education, modeling sustainable lifestyle choices, and organizing for social change through environmental advocacy.

Founded in 1992, Earth Ministry has a history of leading the way in caring for the environment from a faith perspective. Our Greening Congregations Program was the first in the country to help houses of worship implement sustainable practices, and our faithful advocacy program is on the cutting edge of empowering clergy and lay leaders to speak out on public policy issues.

Earth Ministry supports a growing network of congregations and has a national membership. While Earth Ministry is rooted in the Christian tradition, we actively engage all religious communities on climate and energy issues through Washington Interfaith Power & Light. Our programs and resources are available to all.

www.earthministry.org  www.waipl.org

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
According to the most recent 2010 Census data, 81% of Americans live in urban areas. The vast majority of us live, work, play, and worship in cities. So why do we often overlook cities as part of “the environment” that we care about and want to protect?

The environmental justice movement has long understood that working for the health of our neighborhoods is as much part of caring for creation as protecting old growth forests and saving endangered species. Starting in our own backyards builds community, improves quality of life, and provides just and equal access to green spaces and sustainable neighborhoods.

In this issue of Earth Letter, we focus on the built environment. Our cover article tells the story of the organization ioby, which empowers and funds residents across the country to make their cities sunnier, greener, and nicer places to live. In “Cities, Climate Change, and Christianity,” theologian Dr. Sallie McFague encourages city dwellers to embody Christian discipleship by living with restraint. “Unpaving Paradise: This City Is Using Wildflowers to Fight Urban Blight” on page 14 focuses on Los Angeles’ success in planting native wildflowers in vacant lots and road medians in an effort to beautify the urban landscape.

Read on, be inspired, and remember the wise words of Robert Cowan: “A city’s environment is shaped not only by people who have an important influence, but by everyone who lives or works there.”

Blessings,
Having a Heart for Children’s Health
Earth Ministry spent Valentine’s Day in Olympia asking our state senators to have a heart for children’s health by supporting the Toxic Free Kids and Families Act (ESHB 1294). Individualized handmade valentines were delivered to every senator while they were in session on the floor, making quite a visual impact as their desks were filled with pink hearts and chocolate kisses. We also shared the love with representatives who voted yes on the Toxic-Free Kids and Families Act, which passed the House with an outstanding 72-25 bipartisan vote. We definitely made sure that they know that their votes were the key to our hearts!

Coal Export and Christian Ethics
Earth Ministry/WAIPL staff spoke about coal export at two concurrent national ethics conferences this past January. Executive Director LeeAnne Beres presented an extended case study of the religious community’s involvement in the coal export battle at the annual Lutheran Ethicists gathering. Program & Outreach Director Jessie Dye joined with Lummi tribal member Jay Julius at the Society of Christian Ethics annual meeting to tell the story of Lummi opposition to the coal export terminal slated to be built on their sacred lands.

These two events are major professional gatherings for scholars interested in the study of morality within a Christian framework and it was an honor to be invited to present Earth Ministry’s work on the Power Past Coal campaign.

Churches, Clergy, & Congregations
Earth Ministry/WAIPL’s recent outreach included Temple De Hirsch Sinai, University of Washington Hillel Community, University of Washington Wesley Club, and University Temple United Methodist Church in Seattle; Kol HaNeshamah, Holy Rosary, and Our Lady of Guadalupe Parishes in West Seattle; Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Bellevue; and the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island.
Earth Ministry’s 2014 Legislative Priorities

Earth Ministry focused on three environmental priorities in the Washington State Legislature this session. Unfortunately, oil and chemical companies used their influence to block these important bills:

**Toxic-Free Kids and Families Act (ESHB 1294):** This bill would have phased out toxic flame retardants in children’s products and home furniture and allowed state government to check compliance by obtaining information from manufacturers on what flame retardants they are using. The faith community joined with the Washington Toxics Coalition, healthcare workers, firefighters, and many others to address this serious public health issue.

**Closing the Big Oil Tax Loophole (HB 2465):** Oil companies like BP and Shell should be paying to clean up their pollution, not profiting from a state tax loophole that was never meant for them. The Legislature created this “accidental loophole” in 1949, before any oil refineries operated in Washington. Now, Big Oil profits from the system and avoids paying $59 million of their fair share of taxes. Earth Ministry worked in partnership with the Environmental Priorities Coalition to try and close this loophole and reallocate this tax revenue for education.

**Oil Transportation Safety Act (HB 2347):** Throughout the nation, we are hearing about dangerous accidents and fires caused by oil transport. Recent oil train derailments in Canada and the United States highlight the risky business of moving oil through our cities. Yet local governments, first responders, and the public lack basic information on how much, what type, and how oil is moving through their towns. HB 2347 would have required this disclosure.

It was a discouraging legislative session for all of us who want to protect the health of our communities and God’s creation. However, our faith calls us to be people of the resurrection — so we know that our voices make a difference in the long run, despite these temporary setbacks.

**Young Adult Interfaith Conference**

On January 12, Outreach Coordinators Jessica Zimmerle and Karin Frank joined over 120 other young people of faith at a Young Adult Interfaith Conference organized by the Intercommunity Peace & Justice Center and co-sponsored by Earth Ministry/Washington Interfaith Power & Light.

With a theme of *Many Faiths, One Humanity: Unity in Diversity*, the gathering brought together individuals from diverse religious backgrounds to discuss the importance of interfaith collaboration. Speakers, table talks, and breakout sessions left the young adults inspired to undertake interfaith work for social action.
Interfaith Preach-In for Climate Change

Congregations from around the country took part in a three-day campaign over Valentine’s Day weekend to raise awareness about climate change as an urgent issue requiring immediate action. The national Interfaith Preach-In on Climate Change encouraged faith groups to discuss the challenge of climate change from a spiritual perspective, inspire congregants to take action to protect creation, and urge policy makers to support climate protection.

In Washington, over 50 Earth Ministry/WA IPL congregations participated in the Preach-In, reaching nearly 10,000 people of faith across the state with a message of moral concern for the climate.

Putting Faith into Action at the State Capitol

Throughout the legislative session, Earth Ministry/WAIPL members participated in multiple Capitol Drop-in Days, in which we spoke with legislators and their aides about our environmental priorities from a faith perspective.

Religious leaders and nurses joined forces for a drop-in day in support of the Toxic-Free Kids and Families Act on January 14, students from UW’s Methodist Wesley Club went door-to-door talking to legislators about the Oil Transportation Safety Act on January 23, dozens of members participated in a “literature drop” regarding all three of our bills during Interfaith Advocacy Day on January 30, and still more participated in a literature drop that included the Washington State Catholic Conference on February 5.

In addition to these Capitol Drop-in Days, over 300 people of faith participated in Interfaith Advocacy Day, at which Earth Ministry/WAIPL staff led two sessions explaining our environmental priorities.

Each time Earth Ministry/WAIPL steps into the capitol building, we represent you. The faith community is an incredibly powerful moral voice and we thank you for joining us in standing up for care of God’s creation.
Imagine a place in which you felt deeply connected to or powerfully affected by the natural world. What comes to your mind?

I remember the day on which my undergraduate environmental psychology class had our own conversation about our experiences of nature. The professor asked us to think about places that were meaningful for us as children – places where we felt a deep connection to the natural world, and where we experienced what we at Earth Ministry/WAIPL would call “the sacredness of nature.”

Every one of my classmates could identify one or two places that had provided them with a deep sense of connection with the natural world. I recalled summers spent with my sister and friends in a creek running through Ravenna Park in Seattle, WA. Similarly to me, most of my peers identified urban or suburban wildernesses: wooded undeveloped lots, public parks, or even the branches of the climbing tree in their backyard.

However, when we talk about wilderness and experiences of nature, we very often conjure up places like our national parks or the deeply rural parts of our country – remote and scarcely habited, relatively unaltered by human hands. It is far less common that these urban parks or pockets of creation spring to our mind as natural places.

Perhaps it would surprise you to learn that, today, only 19% of Americans live in rural areas. For the majority of us, small patches of green in the city are the types of places that form our day-to-day experiences of nature. They shape our understanding of and nurture our relationship with the natural world. We must never take these places for granted; Jewish tradition regards this connection as so essential that it forbids moving to a city without gardens and greenery.

It is true that many of our contemporary ways of living threaten the well-being of ourselves and our planet. Many of us feel perilously isolated from a sense of nature and wilderness. However, it may be equally dangerous to imagine ourselves as so distinct from the natural world that we could possibly separate ourselves from it. We are reminded of our inseparability when cougars are spotted in our city parks, when tree roots riddle our neat pavement, and when raccoons knock over our garbage cans.

Our faith traditions and our experiences in the natural world teach us that we are a part of a larger whole. We know that our well-being is inextricably tied up with that of the larger living systems in which we reside. This is a reality we must strive to live into, recognizing and cultivating the nature in our midst.

How our humanly-created places integrate with God’s created places – and how we maintain a strong, healthy connection between the two – may be one of the greatest challenges we face today. But the first step is small. When you imagine creation, expand your vision. Together, we can learn to see the beauty of natural life in the most unexpected places.

Karin Frank is the Outreach Coordinator for Earth Ministry’s Washington Interfaith Power & Light project.
Greening the City: Not an Urban Legend After All

By Jessica Zimmerle

It can be tempting to imagine that an urban congregation is limited in its greening by its location. We often think of cities as centers of pollution and waste production – we picture artificial and densely-populated areas that leave people physically and spiritually disconnected from God’s original creation. Having grown up in a sprawling suburbia, I used to doubt the potential for urban congregations to truly “go green.”

I now direct any fellow would-be-doubters to the inspiring success stories of Earth Ministry’s urban Greening Congregations. Sustainability in the city has proven no obstacle for these churches in cities across the country. On the contrary, an urban environment provides many unique opportunities for congregations to include the city community in their greening practices. Creativity arises in each of the greening fields of Worship, Education, Building & Grounds, Community Outreach, and Faithful Advocacy.

As Earth Ministry’s Outreach Coordinator, I have the privilege to attend the green team meetings of many of our Greening Congregations. I have found these green teams thriving in possibilities! The act of urban churches reclaiming their space resonates with the familiar core values of sustainability to reduce, reuse, and recycle as congregations work to renovate what they have instead of always looking to expand or start anew.

I continue to be impressed by the diverse range of large-scale projects that our well-established green teams are undertaking. In a single week, I might meet with Luthers running an on-site soup kitchen supplied by produce grown in the church’s organic community garden, Methodists enhancing their limited landscaping space with rain gardens, and Presbyterians installing bike racks outside their doors to encourage more sustainable transportation choices. If and when the “idea well” runs dry for a green team, Earth Ministry connects congregations to others like their own for inspiration, encouragement, and fresh networking energy.

These creative opportunities are often fun as well as faithful. A favorite experience with one of our Greening Congregations was a morning spent with Ballard First Lutheran Church’s “Greendom Come” team as we had a blast digging up native dune grass from a member’s yard and transplanting it to a local park in need of restoration. This project, part of the congregation’s year-long “God’s Work, Our Hands” service campaign, was a great way to bring together people of all ages to collaborate on habitat restoration, and gave everyone a sense of connection to one of the city’s popular green spaces.

Just as city highways are connected by on-ramps, Earth Ministry ushers congregations onto highways of sustainability. Since navigating through the city can be overwhelming, we are always on call with roadside assistance to help guide our congregations on this journey. I look forward to continuing this work as it has truly been an inspiration to see our innovative green teams working with what little space they have to create big changes in the sustainability of their urban community.

Jessica Zimmerle is Earth Ministry’s Outreach Coordinator.
a new system of food production and distribution. More than 20 organizations have created local solid waste management systems, like a new biodiesel powered truck that takes oyster shells from Manhattan restaurants to a nearby island to be composted. In the last three years, ioby projects have stewarded more than 14,000 acres.

Although we started our work in New York City, we now have projects in 96 cities across the country, from Naknek, Alaska, to Miami, Florida. People of color lead most projects on ioby, and women and girls make up more than 70% of all ioby leaders.

Projects in new cities are really different than those that we saw when we first started out in NYC, but one thing hasn’t changed all that much: ioby projects tend to be small-scale or short-term. They’re lighter, cheaper, quicker, tactical, and flexible; the way the projects manifest tends to be the seed of the full project.

Here are a few to give you an example of what I mean.

**Urban Patch Indianapolis, IN**
In the 1940s, Albert Allen Moore left the Jim Crow south for Indianapolis with an agricultural science degree. Moore began the Flanner House, teaching other African-Americans from the Great Migration how to farm in the city’s vacant lots, and in doing so, became one of the pioneers of urban agriculture in Indy.

Seventy years later, his daughter Joyce and his grandson Justin have started a new organization – Urban Patch – that aims to make the American inner city better.

Justin and Joyce began by purchasing 5,000 square feet of property, made up of seven adjacent lots in the MidNorth side of Indianapolis in an area called Mapleton – Fall Creek. The neighborhood is more than 80% African-American, with a higher density and lower average household income than the rest of Indianapolis.

The space is intentionally located alongside the work of other important organizations in the neighborhood: the local Community Development Corporation’s pocket parks network and the Fall Creek Gardens Urban Growers’ Resource Center.

The property has fruit trees, cover vines, and shrubs, but also provides a much needed open space for neighborhood recreation and other events. A living memorial to Albert Allen Moore, the space functions mostly as a venue for teaching, so that others can learn growing techniques they can apply in other gardens around the city or at home.

Urban Patch’s first ioby campaign was for a modest number of trees and shrubs totaling $1,000; they hit their goal in one week, and then raised another $300. They’ve since run two more projects totaling more than $5,000 to paint a mural and to host cooking, canning, and preserving classes on site.

**Adventures for Kids on the LA River, Los Angeles, CA**
The Los Angeles River is 51 miles long, and runs through the heart of Los Angeles. It’s a vibrant ecosystem, and in many stretches, it’s a free-flowing river with birds and frogs. But to most Angelinos, the river is nothing but a dried-up ditch filled with garbage. In the movie *Grease*, the drag race in the culvert is actually through the Los Angeles River in its area of lowest flow.

To be protected by the Environmental Protection Agency under the Clean Water Act, a river must be deemed “navigable;” that is, passable by boat. And since the LA River is considered by most to be a slab of concrete with little more than a puddle in it, it doesn’t pass the federal navigability test.

That is until one man, George Wolfe, decided to go up against the federal government on that technicality. Working with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (the “Corps”), George ran an ioby campaign for $3,500 to buy permits from the Corps. The permits would allow
forty kids from Los Angeles to kayak down the full 51 miles of the river, thus proving that the river is “navigable.”

Today the federal agencies are reviewing the river’s designation and protection under the Clean Water Act, a great example of how citizen-led, neighbor-funded projects can be short-term demonstrations that radically change public perception.

78th Street Play Street, Queens, NY
In New York City, on average, there are 280 people per acre of open space. In Jackson Heights, Queens, there are 14,000.

The neighborhood has a large number of immigrant residents: nearly 59% are Hispanic, and 24% are Asian-American. More than a dozen languages are spoken, with people coming from 71 different countries. Poverty in Jackson Heights raises the city average, with about 18% of households living below the federal poverty line.

In 2007, a group of parents banded together to create more open spaces for their kids to play. They called it the Jackson Heights Green Alliance, and began a project to close a street to car traffic under the NYC Department of Transportation play street permit.

The street they chose to close is a section of 78th Street adjacent to a small concrete park called Travers Park. When summer came and the permit was in place, they closed the street to car traffic and rolled out the astroturf. They had games and play programming. They blew up a bouncy house. And the kids came out to play, for three summers in a row. Each year, their ioby campaigns brought in more funds from neighbors who live within a half-mile of the project site.

After three years of demonstrating the need and allowing neighbors the chance to test out the expanded park, that section of 78th Street is now permanently closed to car traffic. In addition, the park is now being expanded into an adjacent car lot and school playground, effectively doubling the acres of the acres of open space for play.

The Hampline, Memphis, TN
Like many U.S. cites, Memphis has experienced a flat population growth but a quadrupling of land mass, creating a serious disinvestment in the city core. With about 58,000 vacant lots, Memphians are searching for ways to reuse their city’s open space creatively and productively.

In 2000, the Mayor’s Office identified neighborhoods that could be critical to recovery and that connect the city’s assets across physical barriers. One neighborhood was Binghampton, known as the “Hamp”, an area of about 2 miles and 9,000 residents. In the Hamp, the median household income is just $26,000 and 35% of households live below the poverty level.

To the west is Overton Park and downtown Memphis, including its historic Beale Street District and access to the Mississippi River; to the east are Shelby Farms Park and multiple greenways. A bike lane that connects east and west Memphis breaks in Binghampton, so a coalition of concerned citizens, community organizations, and businesses came together to revitalize the neighborhood and connect these community assets.
After activating the historic Broad Avenue (an effort they named New Face for an Old Broad), the groups decided to connect the two bike lanes using an innovative two-way, protected, and signalized bike route on Broad Avenue. Not only would the open spaces be connected, but also the new construction would bring more foot traffic to the burgeoning business and arts district on Broad.

Of a total $4.5 million budget, this coalition of groups raised the final 5% on ioby. More than 600 donors contributed an average of $40, the majority of whom live within four miles of the future bike lane, named the Hampline, after its new home.

Why are these case studies important?
These short-term or small-scale demonstration projects can be important levers in changing the way the public perceives the current use of public space. Closing a street to car traffic or turning a vacant lot into an orchard can be hard to imagine! Turning a quiet old Main Street into an active arts district or changing the designation of a river might not be the first thing most people would consider.

For many of these groups, there were no other sources of right-sized, timely funding. No institutional funder would support an idea so bold. Citizen philanthropy does mean something different. The crowd means that there is peer pressure to finish the project, a group to hold the leader accountable. ioby projects are neighbor-funded – the majority of ioby donors live within two miles of the project sites.

Local donors are important not only because they demonstrate true community investment; together, we are building long-term stewardship of public space.

CALL TO ACTION
Want to get involved in your community? Here are a few ways for you to get your hands dirty.

1. Start a project of your own and fund it with an ioby campaign: ioby.org/idea
2. Find a project close to your home or close to your heart and make a donation to show you believe in them: ioby.org/projects
3. How to start a play street: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCapY0dxDd8
4. How to install a rain barrel: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-nTsIOcj-0
5. How to raise urban chickens: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZdvPwCPGAA (our most ‘famous’ video)
Most human beings of the twenty-first century will live in cities, and cities are where half of the world's greenhouse gases are generated.

Cities, Climate Change, and Christianity

By Dr. Sallie McFague

Jane Jacobs said that "without cities, we would be poor," but I would add "without nature, we would not exist." If we think of the city as absorbing or replacing nature, I fear that nature's intrinsic value as well as its finite limits will be hidden from our view. What, then, will deter our appetite for unlimited, voracious overutilization of other life-forms and earth processes? What will control our greed (the question that our ecological and economic crises are asking)?

The bottom line is that we are totally, minute-to-minute dependent on nature and its services. Nature in the first sense — "the all-encompassing source or ground of all there is" — our own planet Earth with its particular constitution of elements suitable for living things, is the sine qua non. The human ability to distance ourselves from first nature, both by changing it and by objectifying it, is causing a deep forgetfulness to overtake us.

The city is the prime example of both our greatest accomplishment and our greatest danger. Jerusalem, the city of desire and delight, is fast emerging as Babylon, the city of excessive luxury in the midst of extreme poverty. Cities suck energy from near and far to allow some city dwellers to live at the highest level of comfort and convenience ever known, while many others exist in squalor. I would underscore that this does not mean that we should retreat to either the country or suburbia, for these spaces are even less energy-efficient for millions of human inhabitants. The city is where most of us must live and where just, sustainable living has the best chance.

Nonetheless, city dwellers must attend to the judgment of the United Nations Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the work of more than 1,360 experts worldwide, which claims that we are excessive energy users — we are literally consuming the planet. This massive study reaches the sobering conclusion that out of 24 essential services provided by nature to humanity, nearly two-thirds are in decline. The Assessment stresses the need for consciousness-raising: "We must learn to recognize the true value of nature both in an economic sense and in the richness it provides to our lives in ways more difficult to put numbers on." Such true value ranges from the taste of a cup of clean water to the sight of snow-capped mountains. We are nature's debtors and nature's lovers.

The task before us — "a qualitative shift in our responses and thinking," according to anthropologist David Harvey — is daunting. Yet, such appears to be the overwhelming conclusion coming from all fields that study planetary health. As botanist and conservationist Peter Raven says: "It is also a fundamentally spiritual task."

It is at this point that the religions can make a significant contribution to the planetary crisis.
The Christian incarnational understanding of the God-world relationship — that the world is from the beginning loved by God and is a reflection of the divine — means that flesh, bodies, space and place, air and water, food and habitat are all “religious” matters. The locus of attention of incarnational Christianity is the body, both the world as body and the bodies that compose it.

The Christian incarnational focus on bodies can be seen in the two central historical streams in Christianity: the sacramental and the prophetic. The sacramental dimension says that the world is a reflection of God, tells us of God, and connects the earthly, bodily joys of life (beauty, love, food, music, play) with God. The prophetic dimension insists that since the world is a body, it must be fed and cared for; all parts must receive their just supply of resources and it must be sustained for the indefinite future.

While the sacramental dimension of the model encourages us to appreciate and love others, the prophetic dimension focuses our attention on limits — the recognition that bodies, including the body of the world, are finite. All life-forms must have food, fresh water, clean air, and a habitat.

In the Christian tradition, kenosis, or self-emptying, is a way of understanding God’s actions in creation, the incarnation, and the cross. In creation, God limits the divine self, pulling in, so to speak, to allow space for others to exist. As Paul writes in Philippians 2:7, God “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,” substituting humility and vulnerability for our insatiable appetites.

In the cross, God gives of the divine self without limit to side with the poor and the oppressed. God, like Jesus and the temptations, rejects absolute power and imperialism for a different way. Therefore, Christian discipleship becomes a cruciform life, imitating the self-giving of Christ for others. What an inversion this is of triumphal, imperialistic views of Christianity!

The crisis facing us has to do with how we live on a daily basis — the food we eat, the transportation we use, the size of the house we live in, the consumer goods we buy, the luxuries we allow ourselves, the amount of long-distance air travel we permit ourselves, and so forth. The enemy is the very ordinary life we ourselves are leading as well-off North Americans. And yet, for all its presumed innocence, this way of life, multiplied by billions of people, is both unjust to those who cannot attain this lifestyle and destructive of the very planet that supports us all.

The realities of our time mean that the vocabulary and sensibility of self-limitation, egolessness, sharing, giving space to others, and limiting our energy use no longer sound like a special language for the saints, but rather, like an ethic for all of us. The religions may be the greatest “realists,” with their intuitive appreciation for self-emptying and self-limitation as a way not only to personal fulfillment but also to sane planetary practice. Religions could take the lead in exploring and illustrating how an ethic of self-limitation might function in light of the twenty-first-century crisis of climate change.

For well-off city dwellers, the kenotic, prophetic sensibility means some concrete, on-the-ground changes. It means that the built environment must be minimalized rather than
maximized. It means small condos and apartments, not mansions; living spaces that go up, not out; small, hybrid cars, not Hummers; food that is grown locally, not halfway around the world. It means saying NO, saying “enough.”

This realization should impact us at all levels: what we eat, our means of transportation, what we wear, the places we live, the parks where we play, the offices where we work. One of the greatest challenges of the twenty-first century is decent, livable conditions for the billions who will live in cities. We well-off city dwellers need to take up less space, use less energy, lower our desires for more, attend to needs before wants — become small, in other words.

We need to imagine living within a bounded economy, living with restraint. The planet has limits; it demands we live within these limits. We do not own the earth, we do not even pay rent for it; it is given to us “free” for our lifetime, with the proviso that we treat it with the honor it deserves: appreciating it as a reflection of the divine and loving it as our mother and our neighbor.

This excerpt is reprinted with permission from the Harvard Divinity Bulletin; the full article can be found here: http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news-events/harvard-divinity-bulletin/articles/cities-climate-change-and-christianity.

Dr. Sallie McFague is a Distinguished Theologian in Residence at the Vancouver School of Theology in British Columbia, Canada.
Across Los Angeles County this spring, open, underused plots of land in churches, front yards, schools — even outside a post office — will be teeming with native wildflowers like California coastal poppies, bluebells, and purple needlegrass.

That’s the premise of artist Fritz Haeg’s rehabilitation project Wildflowering L.A., in which native wildflower seeds were sown at 50 sites across Los Angeles County this fall.

“It’s about restoring natural landscape back to the current-day L.A. urban landscape so [it’s] re-infusing native plants in nontraditional sites throughout the entire county,” said Laura Hyatt, development director at LAND.

Wildflowering L.A. brings awareness to the native flora of the region and shows what the landscape looked like prior to development and industrialization. For the initiative, Haeg partnered with Los Angeles Nomadic Division, a nonprofit art that curates site-specific contemporary art projects, and the Theodore Payne Foundation, an organization that promotes preservation of California native flora.

Not only that, but the project helps fight urban blight by beautifying underused land. Locals came together to clear and seed vacant lots in their neighborhood as well as road medians, Hyatt said.

Haeg’s previous projects include Edible Estates, in which he worked around the world to transform domestic front yards into edible landscapes and gardens.

Each site, from Torrance to Eagle Rock to the Palos Verdes Peninsula, is tended by volunteers who were given one of four custom, free wildflower seed mixes to sow. The mixes included coastal, flatlands, hillside, and roadside wildflowers that were inspired by Reyner Banham’s 1971 book Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies.

Haeg’s volunteer-driven project is a way to bring the community together in the context of preserving and enhancing the environment in a sustainable and meaningful way, Hyatt said.

The wildflower seed mixes were optimized for their uses based on climate, soil, and irrigation.

The sites, which vary from 500 square feet to an acre are marked by a handmade wooden carved sign indicating seed type and site number.

The project put out an open call for visible, open land submissions in September and received more than 200 submissions. The sites were picked based on visibility and feasibility, or whether there was room for irrigation, said Hyatt.

Fifty key sites were identified, and two public workshops were held earlier this year at which folks were given their “prescribed” mix, which they then planted after preparing the land, she said.

Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, a professor of urban planning at UCLA, who specializes in inner-city neighborhoods and public spaces, called the project “positive and commendable.” She said inner-city neighborhoods are the most challenging because of the lack of greenery and abundance of concrete.

“At first glance it’s a great idea to put wildflowers on empty lots and make it greener. They don’t need a lot of water,” Loukaitou-Sideris said.

Having a wildflower initiative makes communities feel responsible for maintaining the area—which is especially helpful in locations that have been neglected, she said.

While a flower planting initiative cannot on its own battle blight, it will help improve the image of the physical environment, and this is a positive step, Loukaitou-Sideris said.

Using spaces in the inner city was something the project took into consideration and included parks, schools, and residential and business sites throughout south and east Los Angeles, Hyatt said.

An exhibition or event will take place in April or May, she said, based on rainfall and the peak bloom for the wildflowers; the volunteers and the public will be able to see the images and videos and talk about the flowers that bloomed.
In 2013, Magnolia United Church of Christ in Seattle, WA, was awarded the Environmental Protection Agency’s Energy Star rating. An Earth Ministry Greening Congregation since 2007, the church was one of only 39 houses of worship in the country to receive this distinguished recognition. This rating is an acknowledgment of Magnolia UCC’s profound environmental focus in the recent renovation of their facility and systems.

The transformation of Magnolia UCC began with their newly appointed Chair of the Facilities Committee, Roger Seeman. Early in his office, Roger observed that despite satisfactory routine maintenance, the building needed several structural renovations. Taking initiative, he began to implement small projects one at a time. His enthusiasm, commitment, and success soon attracted the attention of other church members who began to join him in the increasingly challenging work.

As a congregation, Magnolia UCC has long been committed to creation care, and the decision to renovate their worship space from an uncompromisingly green stance became a natural next step. With the increasing aid of members and a generous capital campaign, the church began projects that produced a return on their investments through more efficient uses of water, electricity, and natural gas. Lighting efficiency and low flow toilet projects were projected to pay off in 1.2 years, after which the church will benefit from lower annual electricity and water costs.

Developments included re-lamping fluorescent light fixtures, installing low flow toilets, insulating the attics, installing modern thermostats, replacing all exit lights with LEDs, and installing motion detectors and light sensors. According to the Energy Star rating system, Magnolia UCC’s building generates 35% fewer greenhouse gas emissions than similar buildings across the United States. What an incredible accomplishment!

These numerous renovations were made possible by the enthusiastic participation of many in the congregation. Roger and other greening leaders emphasized how working together strengthened their faith community, explaining, “The church is God’s house, but it is our home. The care of our home is everyone’s responsibility; it is also everyone’s love. You can feel that love as our members’ eyes shine when they see the beauty and utility of improvements and they have the satisfaction of having contributed to it.”

Members found joy in dedicating their time and energy to these projects and new friendships were forged in the process. Some congregants became more active through their renovation activities, and the congregation watched as the church’s greening became a welcoming invitation to inquisitive neighbors. Though these good stewards never anticipated it, their commitment to sustainability not only inspired people within the church, but in the local community as well.

Magnolia UCC’s Energy Star award represents a significant accomplishment for the church and their extended community. The congregation reports it is “now on a path of greening mindfulness, on which we will walk together ever alert to new ways to become greener, with a dedication to weaving creation care into every aspect of church life.” Congratulations!
The smallest patch of green to arrest the monotony of asphalt and concrete is as important to the value of real estate as streets, sewers, and convenient shopping — James Felt