Welcome Warm
By Sr. Clare Josef-Maier

I was sixteen when I sang at my grandfather’s funeral. My grandparents’ faithful lives were a legacy, and I wanted very much to make them proud. But when my grandfather died mere months before I made public affirmation of my baptism, the timing of his loss broke my heart.

Why my father chose the song he did for me, I can’t be sure. But now, with the eyes of an adult, I see words that helped me hold together both the hard reality of death and the tender promise of new life. Whether or not I understood them, the words comforted me.

*The Word of God is source and seed; it comes to die and sprout and grow.*
*So make your dark earth welcome warm; root deep the grain God bent to sow.*

This holding-together of sorrow and joy, of death and life, is the spiritual home of the Christian faith.

The liturgical season that precedes Christmas, called Advent, is a season of anticipation – we anticipate our God, the Creator, coming to dwell among us in the form of the creation. With Mary and Joseph, we entertain angels and their promises of great joy.

Yet for those of us in the northern hemisphere, Advent is accompanied by winter’s sleepy skies and frozen landscapes. It envelops us in candlelight and evening vigils, and carries us through the longest nights of the year to the winter solstice and to
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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
Winter is coming. It’s not just a catch phrase from Game of Thrones – the days have grown shorter, the weather is turning colder, and all of creation is curling in upon itself for a good long rest.

As we head toward the darkest night of the year, it gives our hearts joy to remember that this season also signifies the return of the light. Just as the winter solstice coaxes the sun into slow wakefulness, Christmas brings with it the “light of the world” in the birth of Jesus Christ.

Known as incarnation, this embodiment of God in the world through Jesus is a central tenant of Christianity. In our cover story, Sr. Clare Josef-Maier likens incarnation to a seed sprouting in warm, welcome earth, growing into a new creation rooted in a holy source.

In Creation as the Body of God, Fr. Richard Rohr encourages us to remember that God’s presence in the world is felt not just through the human body of Jesus, but also in all aspects of creation. And lastly, in this issue of Earth Letter we also offer you some ideas for a “greener” Christmas that reflect our shared values for a low impact, creation-honoring celebration.

All of us at Earth Ministry wish you and yours a Merry Christmas – now and every day, since God is always with us.

Blessings,
GOINGS-ON at Earth Ministry

Earth Ministry relies on donations from individuals like you to make this important work possible. Join or renew your membership in Earth Ministry, sign up for monthly giving, or make a special gift at www.earthministry.org or by calling (206) 632-2426. Thank you for your support!

The Faith and Environment Network Joins Earth Ministry

Just under ten years ago, the Faith and Environment Network was founded in Spokane, Washington, with a similar vision and mission as Earth Ministry. After many years of joyful collaboration, shared goals, and effective action, we are delighted to announce that the Faith and Environment Network is becoming part of Earth Ministry.

Two long-time leaders in the Faith and Environment Network – Rev. Tom Soeldner, a retired Lutheran pastor, and Evita Krislock of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist – have joined the Earth Ministry Board to keep an active and visible presence in Eastern Washington. Together, we will ensure that the voices of people of faith throughout our region are heard on key issues of creation care.

Eastern Washington Outreach

Earth Ministry staff delight in visits to colleagues and friends in Eastern Washington. In July, LeeAnne Beres and Jessie Dye traveled to the southeast portion of the state, starting with a meeting in Yakima with Green Team leaders from Wesley United Methodist, the Unitarian Universalists, and Central Lutheran.

In the Tri-Cities, we met with Citizens’ Climate Lobby activists and friends from Riverview United Methodist Church in Pasco, and toured both the new Hanford Reach museum as well as the national monument itself.

In Walla Walla, after preaching on faith and environment at First Congregational United Church of Christ, we led an adult education class on our statewide advocacy priorities. We also hosted a “coffee conversation” on public lands, fossil fuel exports, and safe chemicals, which was attended by nearly 20 religious activists from eight churches.

In August, LeeAnne and Jessie traveled to Spokane to meet with leaders of the Faith and Environment Network (FEN) to finalize plans for joining the two organizations. A larger “coffee conversation” followed, with founders and activists from FEN discussing strategies for our joint environmental advocacy.

While in Spokane, we met with Lutheran Bishop Martin Wells, Catholic Bishop Blaise Cupich (now Archbishop-elect of Chicago), and retired Catholic Bishop William Skylstad, discussing public lands, coal export, and indigenous treaty rights. We also held productive meetings with religious leaders from six area congregations and led an adult education class at Manito United Methodist Church.

To round out our trip, Earth Ministry staff and local leaders met with U.S. Senator Patty Murray’s Eastern Washington staff to share 150+ postcards from the religious community in support of public lands.
Lummi Totem Pole Journey: Our Shared Responsibility

The Lummi Nation undertook another Totem Pole Journey to empower people to “Warrior Up” against proposed fossil fuel mega-projects that threaten our communities and all of creation. At stops along the 2,500 mile journey, the House of Tears carvers were met with great support. Earth Ministry/WAIPL organized the events in Spokane and Seattle, with tremendous turnout from the faith community.

Over 200 people attended the blessing at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in Spokane, a city that would be heavily impacted by increased rail transport of coal and oil. Episcopal Bishop James Waggoner and Lutheran Bishop Martin Wells were among the keynote speakers, which also included Native leaders and local elected officials.

In Seattle, 500 gathered at St. Mark’s Cathedral for a totem pole smudging ceremony followed by a presentation of a letter of support to tribal leaders from denominational executives. Episcopal Bishop Greg Rickel, Lutheran Bishops Richard Jaech and Kirby Unti, Evergreen Baptist Conference Minister Marcia Patton, United Church of Christ Conference Minister Mike Denton, Sr. Judith Desmarais of the Sisters of Providence Leadership Team, and a representative of Disciples of Christ Regional Minister Sandy Messick all stood in solidarity with the Lummi and other Native elders in opposition to coal export.

King County Executive Dow Constantine, Chair of the Safe Energy Leadership Alliance, also spoke and received an ovation when he stated, “I stand with the Lummi Nation and all those in the Pacific Northwest who are working to protect our air, our water, and our fisheries.”

Details and more great photos from the Seattle and Spokane Totem Pole blessings can be found at bit.ly/totempole_seattle and bit.ly/totempole_spokane.
Churches, Clergy, and Congregations

It was our great honor to recently award Earth Ministry Greening Congregation banners to St. Leo’s Catholic Church in Tacoma, Trinity Episcopal in downtown Seattle, and Peace Lutheran in West Seattle. As always, Earth Ministry board and staff made numerous other presentations in congregations around the region.

In addition to our Eastern Washington outreach (see page 3), we spoke at four South Whidbey churches, presented at Pilgrim Congregational UCC in Anacortes, screened the movie Toxic Hot Seat at United Churches of Ferndale, taught “Advocacy for all Creation” for an Eco-Spirituality class at Seattle University’s School of Theology and Ministry, and led an adult education class at University Temple United Methodist Church.

Through various outreach projects, we are happy to have connected with the office of Faith Formation at the Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle, Center for American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), Acacia Foundation, Seattle 2030 District, Interfaith Center of Corporate Responsibility, Faith Action Network, Positive Futures Network, Seattle Tilth, Bellingham Unitarian Universalists, and Lutheran Bishops Kirby Unti and Richard Jaech.

Care More, Car Less Sundays

Throughout the fall, congregations across Seattle have taken the time to care more about creation by using their cars less. In partnership with the City of Seattle Office of Sustainability and Environment, Earth Ministry/WAIPL launched the Care More, Car Less Sunday program to encourage congregants to commute to church by walking, biking, carpooling, or taking the bus.

Churches met the challenge with enthusiasm and creativity by celebrating with bike parades, hosting electric car shows, or incorporating a Blessing of the Travelers into worship. Transportation surveys allowed Earth Ministry/WAIPL to calculate the total reduction in carbon emissions for each congregation, and participants also made pledges committing to sustainable transportation choices in the future. Together, we significantly decreased single-occupancy vehicle miles driven while connecting with one another and God’s creation.
The Eye of the Beholder

As the darkness comes earlier each day and briefer expressions of daylight are shared with clouds and rain, we move into winter in the Pacific Northwest. My summer garden has been harvested, my winter garden is a cover crop of vetch, grass, and crimson clover – my grape vines have been pruned, my potted plants covered, and I await the late winter pruning of my fruit trees.

In my faith tradition, this is a season that challenges one to see and experience life’s incarnation in the hidden, unexpected, and less obvious. While Christmas is the celebration of the incarnation of our Creator as a baby in a manger in Bethlehem, Father Richard Rohr reminds me of a larger picture of incarnation: “Two thousand years ago was the human incarnation of God in Jesus, but before that there was the first and original incarnation through light, water, land, sun, moon, stars, plants, trees, fruit, birds, serpents, cattle, fish and ‘every kind of wild beast’ (Genesis 1:3-15).”

This “original incarnation” touches, empowers, and mobilizes so many of us in Earth Ministry.

My energy, passion, and deep desire to be an advocate for all living things begin in the wonder of it all. I feed that hunger for wonder in the people I bump into in life through the daily walks I take in the outdoor with my wife Carolee, the challenging places I find myself in my volunteer work, the hours I spend with health care professionals, and in moments with my loved ones.

Last week, Carolee and I spent a morning walking the hilly Mt. Baker neighborhood in southeast Seattle. For two hours, we walked through woodsy ravines, along a lakeshore, on top of tree-lined ridges, and through tunnels under roadways and residential neighborhoods. The variety of ecosystems and their relationship with human neighbors was intriguing.

Most interesting to us were the community gardens we came upon in our walk. One was on the floor of a deep ravine in the woods as it winds up a hill, another on a ridge in the middle of a residential neighborhood. Both had mid-day gardeners who were fierce advocates of pesticide-free, compost gardening. They offered us some of the fruit of their labor as they described areas of the garden set aside to harvest for local food banks. Our biggest surprise was the insistence we visit one garden’s public restroom. Its walls were mosaic art of butterflies, bees, sunflowers, ladybugs, and beetles – reflections of the original incarnation. Beauty is truly in the eye of the beholder.

As they described the community organizing, public advocacy, and land use planning it took to preserve these garden acreages for urban growing, I was reminded of our work through Earth Ministry and partner organizations. Wonder can happen anywhere, but it takes all of us as reflections of a Creator’s incarnation to do the advocacy and organizing to uncover, develop, and preserve places where wonder can to flourish. Embrace the incarnation around you.

Rev. Steve Grumm is a Board Member of Earth Ministry.

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Incarnation in Red  By Jessie Dye

Early in the campaign against coal export terminals and the “exploding oil trains of death” that are making their way through the Pacific Northwest, a group of organizers was planning for the first public hearing on the subject. We decided to ask everyone to wear red, indicating opposition to the climate insanity that is fossil fuel export. Red is for STOP, red is for passion, red is to stand out brightly. Red is for the incarnation of the Holy Spirit in the work of the world.

Attending a hearing, joining a pilgrimage of others similarly concerned, gathering knowledge about the issue for two minutes of testimony, mustering the courage to speak in front of a crowd – these are all versions of God incarnate in our time. The Word becomes words. These people, putting voice to the greatest values and the smallest policy details, represent the movement of the Spirit in our time.

The most recent fossil fuel transportation hearing was held in Olympia, WA, on October 30, running from 6pm to late into the night. More than 750 people packed the room, creating a sea of red. Almost 200 citizens spoke for two minutes each, sharing how oil by rail impacts their livelihood and the health of their communities. The religious voice was represented by a Presbyterian chaplain, Lutheran minister, United Church of Christ pastor, Methodist churchwoman, Episcopalian lay leader, and a cradle Catholic, among many others.

Our faithful team sat and listened to testifiers making various points about safety and health, cost and risk, and especially the futility of trying to prevent an oil spill or respond appropriately to a catastrophic explosion. People clad in red, one after another, spoke in protection of Earth’s air and water.

As the articulate and well-reasoned testimony went on, everyone in the room realized that it is not possible to mitigate the damage that will result from the accidents that will inevitably come from these heavy, dirty, and dangerous fossil fuel trains. No first responder can successfully manage the disaster waiting to happen as a result of highly explosive Bakken oil moving in trainloads of 100+ flimsy cars over crumbling bridges, eroded tracks, and unstable hillside.

The hundreds of people who spoke were full of the Holy Spirit, whether each individual knew it or not. Some would be shocked if we informed them they were testifying as the incarnation of Spirit into life, protecting the abundant gifts of life itself. But each port commissioner, homeowner, firefighter, religious leader, scientist, and mom was speaking with the voice of the greater good, enacting the values that our faith traditions instill in us.

Sometimes it seems we are over-matched – a small group of citizens wearing red speaking for God’s creation against the billions of dollars oil companies deploy. If we were anybody else, we might agree. But we are people of faith, and we know who is sending us forward with tongues of fire. Coal and oil companies are themselves over-matched by Spirit, and its incarnation in our people.

Jessie Dye is Earth Ministry/WAIPL's Program & Outreach Director.
The Incarnation of God did not happen in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. That is just when we started taking it seriously. The incarnation actually happened 14.5 billion years ago with a moment that we now call “The Big Bang.” That is when God actually decided to materialize and to self-expose.

Two thousand years ago was the human incarnation of God in Jesus, but before that there was the first and original incarnation through light, water, land, sun, moon, stars, plants, trees, fruit, birds, serpents, cattle, fish, and “every kind of wild beast” according to our own creation story (Genesis 1:3-25). This was the “Cosmic Christ” through which God has “let us know the mystery of his purpose, the hidden plan he so kindly made from the beginning in Christ” (Ephesians 1:9). Christ is not Jesus’ last name, but the title for his life’s purpose.

Jesus is the very concrete truth revealing and standing in for the universal truth. As Colossians puts it “he is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation” (1:15), he is the one glorious part that names and reveals the even more glorious whole. “The fullness is founded in him . . . everything in heaven and everything on earth” (Colossians 1:19-20).

Christ, for John Duns Scotus was the very first idea in the mind of God, and God has never stopped thinking, dreaming, and creating the Christ. “The immense diversity and pluriformity of this creation more perfectly represents God than any one creature alone or by itself,” adds Thomas Aquinas in his Summa Theologica (47:1).

For most of us, this is a significant shaking of our foundational image of the universe and of our religion. Yet if any group should have come to this quite simply and naturally, it should have been the three groups of believers that call themselves “monotheists”: Jews, Christians, and Muslims all believe that the world was created by one God. It would seem to follow therefore that everything, everything without exception, would bear the clear imprint and likeness of the one Creator. Doesn’t that seem to follow? How could we miss that? After all, we believed that One God created everything out of nothing.

We must realize what a muddle we have got ourselves into by not taking incarnation and the body of God seriously. It is our only Christian trump card, and we have yet to actually play it! As Sallie McFague states so powerfully in The Body of God, “salvation is the direction of all of creation, and creation is the very place of salvation.” All is God’s place, which is our place, which is the only place and every place.

In the 4th century St. Augustine said that “the church consists in the state of communion of the whole world” (Ecclesiam in totius orbis communione consistere). Wherever we are connected, in right relationship, you might say “in love,” there is the Christ, the Body of God, and there is the church.

But we whittled that Great Mystery down into something small, exclusive, and manageable too. The church became a Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant private club, and not necessarily with people who were “in communion” with anything.
else, usually not with the natural world, animals, with non-Christians, or even with other Christians outside their own denomination. It became a very tiny salvation, hardly worthy of the name. God was not very victorious at all.

Our very suffering now, our condensed presence on this common nest that we have fouled, will soon be the one thing that we finally share in common. It might well be the one thing that will bring us together.

The earth and its life systems on which we all entirely depend (just like God!) might soon become the very thing that will convert us to a simple Gospel lifestyle, to necessary community, and to an inherent and universal sense of the holy.

I know it is no longer words, doctrines, and mental belief systems that can or will reveal the fullness of this Cosmic Christ. This earth indeed is the very Body of God, and it is from this body that we are born, live, suffer, and resurrect to eternal life. Either all is God’s Great Project, or we may rightly wonder whether anything is God’s Great Project. One wonders if we humans will be the last to accept this.

“From the beginning until now, the entire creation has been groaning in one great act of giving birth, and not only creation, but all of us who possess the first fruits of the Spirit, we also groan inwardly, as we wait for our bodies to be set free” (Romans 8:22-23).

It seems that St. Paul is saying here that we human ones might be the last ones to jump aboard God’s great plan. There is the groaning of growing in all of creation, and the groaning of resisting and “waiting” in us humans.

All of creation, it seems, has been obedient to its destiny. In When Kingfishers Catch Fire, Gerard Manley Hopkins writes, “each mortal thing does one thing and the same . . . myself it speaks and spells, crying ‘What I do is me, for that I came.’” Wouldn’t it be our last and greatest humiliation, surely the “first being last,” (Matt. 20:16) if we one day realized that all other creatures have obeyed their destiny unblinkingly and with trustful surrender. Watch the plants and animals!

It is only humans who have resisted “the one great act of giving birth,” and in fact have frequently chosen death for themselves and for so many others.

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Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr is the Founding Director of the Center for Action and Contemplation and Dean of the Rohr Institute’s Living School for Action and Contemplation opening in the Fall of 2013 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. An internationally recognized speaker and teacher, he is the author of numerous books including, Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life and Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps, and Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self. For more information on Fr. Richard and the CAC, please visit cac.org.
Christmas. And this season that celebrates family, love, and joy, can be the loneliest and most painful time of the year for many. These truths in tension, evident in so much of our human reality, make for an uncomfortable space to dwell. It is so uncomfortable that we struggle to imagine God is here with us in this strange world. We sometimes convince ourselves that God must be in some other place, where there is only light and life – that surely our experiences of sin, evil, and death separate us from our Creator. But Christmas story keeps us as people of faith from straying too far into these untruths.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. John 1:1-4, 14a

“Incarnation” is a unique, difficult word, but simply comes from the Latin for “to become flesh.” The Word from the prologue to John’s gospel becomes flesh and dwells among humanity, fully human. John – along with St. Paul the apostle and other church fathers – uses this description of the Word to connect readers back to the ancient Hebrew image of Wisdom: It was Wisdom who was present with God before the heavens or earth were established; she was a master worker beside God in creation, rejoicing in the inhabited world and in the human race (Proverbs 8:22-31). She is often understood to be God’s self-expression, the way the Creator’s very being is communicated to the created world.

And then, in a strange, beautiful turn, this Word is knit together in the womb of a woman and becomes a human child. The child is born and grows into a man, living in the heart of human suffering and fear. He teaches, ministers, heals, and turns much of what we thought knew about being human on its head. He also loves, weeps, rages, and is deeply moved. This man, whom his mother named Jesus, becomes a liability to those in power and is publicly executed when he is little more than thirty.

It’s a story we know well, which is why we know that while the story seems like it should end there, it doesn’t.

The Word of God is source and seed; it comes to die and sprout and grow.

The Word of God was in the beginning and is itself a new beginning. As we witness in God’s good creation, new life
grows out of the body of death. When a seed is planted and grows, the new plant comes at the cost of the seed – it is a seed no longer, but something distinct from what it was.

In this way we come to understand the meaning of God’s incarnation. The Word becomes the seed of something entirely new in Christ Jesus. Through the incarnation, the Creator is communicated into the uniqueness of a singular created life. Jesus’ death was part of experiencing human life – it was inevitable, and even crucial. Out of this death, the Word sprouts and grows into a new creation that we call the reign of God.

This is the story by which we come to understand the strange double-truths of our existence: How can God be both transcendent and immanently present? How can our lives be so full of sin, pain, and death, yet we speak of love, grace, and healing?

God’s incarnation helps us grasp something in our existence beyond the world’s suffering and pain. It helps us imagine that death is not the final word. A new creation exists within God’s first creation. By grace through faith, we claim the gospel truth that the whole created world is reconciled again to its source. The new creation is present in, with, and under all life – quite different from imaginings of a new heaven and new earth as something apart from the created life we know.

As all things are reconciled in God, we now hope for our own reconciliation with the world – with other humans, with nonhuman animal life, and with the earth. The wounds we have scarred into our earth are deep, and much of the life we have destroyed cannot be brought back. But as we see the life around us rooted in the same holy Source from which we grow, we see the Word present in a new creation. Our old ways of seeing have passed away.

So make your dark earth welcome warm;
root deep the grain God bent to sow.

At sixteen, singing these words at my grandfather’s funeral, I couldn’t have made much sense of them. But they were a gift all the same. The grief I feel at my grandfather’s death is cradled and soothed by words of new life, and by the reminder of the seed of Wisdom planted in my own heart’s dark earth.

Like a child again, I hear the Christmas story of the Word becoming a human child knit together in Mary’s womb. I hear of one whose life, death, and resurrection have inspired people of faith across the globe and over thousands of years. I am borne up in the promise that this resurrection is a new creation – that in the reign of God, the Word dwells in all.

And I am transformed by the assurance that, through the incarnation, God takes in and takes on our humanity with full understanding of what and who we are. Each of our unique lives dwells in the Creator’s own self-expression. We are called to respond to this grace with our own deepest and most authentic self-expression. We know that Wisdom rejoices in this, that she delights in you and in me.

In this Advent season, let your heart feel this call. Make your dark earth welcome warm. Whether you are joyful or grieving, surrounded by family and friends or alone, at peace or anxious – root deep. And then, grow – God is with us.

Sr. Clare Josef-Maier is the Editor of Earth Letter.
Religions for the Earth Conference
Earth Ministry/WAIPL staff LeeAnne Beres and Jessica Zimmerle attended the Religions for the Earth conference in New York City in September. International leaders from diverse faith traditions gathered at Union Theological Seminary to discuss the moral issue of climate change.

Conversations addressed global and local environmental justice issues, re-evaluation of systems driving production and consumption, and revitalization of Earth-keeping narratives at the core of our religious traditions.

As Chief Arvol Looking Horse, a spiritual leader of the Lakota Sioux urged, participants left the conference with renewed optimism to "create an energy shift as we respect each other’s nations and be the spirit of the silenced."

People’s Climate March
While in New York City, LeeAnne and Jessica also participated in the People’s Climate March.

Touted as the largest climate demonstration in history, over 400,000 people marched through central Manhattan to advocate for climate action. The march coincided with the United Nations Climate Summit, making a powerful statement to world leaders who have the authority to implement strong climate policy at next year’s UN Climate Conference in Paris.

Nearly 25 Earth Ministry/WAIPL members made the trip to New York to march amongst 12,000 other people of faith from around the nation, and many more participated in a solidarity marches back in Seattle and in other Washington communities. These and other People’s Climate March events around the world demonstrated a clear commitment from the religious community to take on the moral challenge of climate change.
Toxic Hot Seat Screenings

People from all walks of life are concerned about toxic chemicals in our homes. To raise awareness about chemical flame retardants in household furniture, Earth Ministry partnered with the Washington Toxics Coalition, local fire departments, and medical professionals to host a statewide tour of the documentary film, *Toxic Hot Seat*.

Set against the backdrop of the award-winning 2012 *Chicago Tribune* investigative series “Playing With Fire,” *Toxic Hot Seat* weaves an intricate story of manipulation that details how Big Tobacco convinced fire safety officials to back a standard that requires furniture to be filled with toxic flame retardants. The film documents how chemical companies obscure the risks to public health and misrepresent chemical safety data by paying “experts” to alarm legislators and the public with misleading information.

We hosted *Toxic Hot Seat* screenings around Washington, including showings in Kirkland, Kent, Ferndale, Wenatchee, Lakewood, Whidbey Island, Seattle, Tacoma, and Duvall. In the lead-up to the 2015 Legislative Session, it is more important than ever to set the record straight in order to ban toxic flame retardants in Washington.

Take Back Your Time

On October 7, Earth Ministry was proud to host author and international speaker John de Graaf for our 20th annual Celebration of St. Francis at Olympic View Community Church of the Brethren.

John, co-author of *Affluenza* and *What’s the Economy For, Anyway?,* made the case that Americans work too much and consume too much, and that this passion for economic growth contributes to inequality, unhappiness, stress, and poor environmental stewardship.

He put forward specific policy recommendations for better work/life balance such as mandating paid vacation time, sick leave and a livable minimum wage for workers, as well as suggesting personal actions to improve our quality of life by slowing down and taking back our time. Spirituality plays a key role in cultivating happiness, and John encouraged attendees to “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” instead of “Remember your cell phone and keep it handy.”

The plea of St. Francis to slow down and become re-enchanted with the sacredness of the world has never been more relevant than it is today – and thanks to John de Graaf, over 110 attendees left better equipped to face the busy-ness of everyday life.
Christmas is a season vulnerable to excess—excessive buying, eating, drinking, stress, packaging, wrapping, and waste. An extra million tons of waste is generated each week in the United States between Thanksgiving and Christmas, according to the California Integrated Waste Management Board.

We know we are called to be good stewards of creation, even during the holidays. So here are some suggestions to keep you strong in your values, even when it means being countercultural.

As communities of faith:
- Create a focus on greening the holidays through related sermons, prayers, newsletter articles, and Advent activities
- Decorate the sanctuary with greens and with fewer or no extra lights
- Decorate the Christmas tree without using strings of lights, or use LED lights (which use 90% less electricity than like-sized incandescent bulbs)
- Have a pre-holiday fair trade fundraiser—sell coffee, tea, cocoa, olive oil, vanilla, candy, and handicrafts
- Recycle Christmas trees for mulch

As individuals and families:
- Give handmade gifts or buy locally made items
- Give gift certificates that honor loved ones’ time, energy, and talents
- Give memberships in or donations to social and Earth justice organizations (like Earth Ministry!)
- Give tickets to a play, concert, or movie
- Give gifts that are durable and will be long-lasting
- Send tree-free paper cards, or ones made of 100% recycled paper, preferably printed with soy or other vegetable-based ink
- Wrap gifts in recycled materials such as old maps, newspaper comics, wallpaper samples, old sheet music, and out-of-date calendar photos
- Wrap and tie packages with reusable ribbon, fabric, raffia, or yarn
- Make cloth gift bags and reuse them year after year
- Use flowers, pine-cones, greens, herbs, or other natural package decorations
- Pack gifts to be mailed using real popcorn or biodegradable corn starch packing material instead of polystyrene “peanuts”
- Decrease holiday waste, stress, and spending
- Increase time spent with family and friends, and on volunteer work, donations, singing, praying, thoughtfulness, compassion, loving kindness, and Earth-friendly practice

Sr. Alexandra Kovats, a long-time friend and supporter of Earth Ministry, is fueled by an innate awareness of God’s presence in all of creation. The topic of incarnation resonates with her on a personal level, and the embodiment of the divine is a strong theme in her teaching and spiritual journey.

Sr. Alexandra, a Sister of St. Joseph of Peace and professor at Seattle University, has devoted much of her life to the study and promotion of ecological spirituality. She desires to embrace the presence of the divine in all of her relationships, embodying God’s love and compassion in her very being.

Growing up Roman Catholic, Sr. Alexandra cannot recall a time when she was unaware of God’s presence in creation. She shares the importance that natural beauty holds in her Hungarian tradition, recalling how “a walk in the woods, sitting by a river or the ocean, watching the clouds roll by, or experiencing a beautiful sunset has made my heart sing from an early age.” Experiencing nature as prayer was solidified for Sr. Alexandra when she was introduced to creation spirituality, which led her to obtain Master’s and Doctorate degrees in the field.

Sr. Alexandra defines incarnation as “the awareness and recognition of the reality that God is intimately present and chooses to become enfolded in all of created reality.” She explains that the majority of Christianity focuses on Jesus as the primary revelation of incarnation while she personally believes that the process of incarnation began with the beginning of the Universe.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, an influential theologian in Sr. Alexandra’s discernment, advocated that incarnation and creation are not two separate acts but are in fact two dimensions of the same action: God’s gift of self in love. “If God is with us in the flesh, here and now, on Earth,” she asks, “how do we live in this reality?”

One way that Sr. Alexandra strives to live within the reality of incarnation is through her senses, which she refers to as her “God detectors.” She quotes Gerald Manley Hopkins, saying that our senses help us discover that our world is indeed “charged with the grandeur of God.” By sensing how every atom, molecule, and creature is drenched in divinity, we grow in appreciation and awe of the sacredness of our world.

As a scholar of eco-spirituality, Sr. Alexandra has witnessed some shifts around conversations on incarnation. She has observed her own students uncovering a more expansive theology of incarnation, exploring its implication for their own spiritual lives and pastoral outreach. In the larger conversation surrounding eco-spirituality, she has seen a shift from dominion of the earth to more widespread focus on stewardship. Sr. Alexandra advocates that we take this a step further and embrace more of a kinship model, recognizing that “we are kin to all this is.”

Sr. Alexandra Kovats is a gifted teacher who fully senses and clearly articulates the role of incarnation in her faith. Her insight can encourage us all to become people of justice and compassion, living in harmony with the divine embodied in all of creation.
Christ Has No Body

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world,

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,

Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.

Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.

– Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)