

THE CANOPY OF CREATION

TREES, FAITH, AND THE WORK OF JUSTICE

A RESOURCE FROM



**CREATION
JUSTICE
MINISTRIES**

creationjustice.org

“A tree gives glory
to God by being a tree.”

— THOMAS MERTON

But not every tree, or every neighborhood,
has been given the space to become
what God intends.



We offer our deep gratitude to the team of writers and contributors who worked on this resource.

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Supplements for this resource, including a tree planting guide, can be found at creationjustice.org/canopyofcreation.



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LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The Canopy of Creation is an invitation to **look up.**

It's an invitation to notice the shade that meets us like mercy on a hot day; to remember the hush of a wooded trail, the steady presence of trunks and branches that outlast our moods and our news cycles. Many of us already love trees. We have felt their beauty in our bodies as cool air under leaves, birdsong held in a canopy, the quiet companionship of a living thing that asks nothing from us but attention.

And yet Scripture suggests that trees are never only scenery.

From the beginning, God plants a garden and fills it with *"every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food"* (Genesis 2:9). Indeed, both beauty and nourishment belong together in God's economy. The story of salvation turns, for Christians, on a tree, where human violence and divine love collide, and where God begins the work of making all things new. And when the Bible reaches its final pages, God's future comes to us as a city healed by a river and lined with trees whose leaves are *"for the healing of the nations"* (Revelation 22:2).

In other words: **trees are woven through the life of God with the world. They are gifts, they are witnesses, they are, mysteriously, instruments of healing.**

This resource begins with a truth we need the courage to see: in many cities, tree canopy follows the same fault lines as historic redlining. Neighborhoods that were denied investment generations ago are often the same neighborhoods with fewer trees today; neighborhoods experiencing higher

temperatures, poorer air quality, and greater vulnerability to flooding. This is a creation justice issue because access to the life-giving benefits of trees, including shade, clean air, and cooling, has been shaped not by chance, but by systemic inequity.

If that feels heavy, take heart: the gospel never asks us to see the truth without also offering a way forward. Tree equity has a strikingly tangible pathway: planting and protecting trees where canopy has been withheld. But the church also knows that planting is never just about the plant. Seeds need soil and communities need trust. Before we plant trees, we must practice the slow, sacred work of listening: to neighbors, to local leaders, to the story of a place, and to the wisdom already rooted there. Tree planting becomes a kind of patient, relational, and embodied discipleship, learning to love our neighborhoods the way God loves them.

The Canopy of Creation invites you into that discipleship. Inside you'll find theological grounding, sermon starters, worship resources, stories of churches and partners doing the work, and practical steps for advocacy and action.

Arboreally yours,



Avery Davis Lamb
Executive Director
Creation Justice Ministries



If you love trees, this resource is for you. And if you're ready to let that love widen into justice — into shade shared, healing offered, and neighborhoods made more whole — come on in.

Let's grow a canopy of creation together.



INTRODUCTION

Recognizing Roots of (In)Justice & Resilience



In cities across the United States, there is a striking correlation between historic redlining maps and modern day tree canopy maps: precisely those communities that were historically redlined are the same ones that lack tree canopy coverage.

As you layer on other social and economic factors, like race, income, and asthma rates, the trend continues. The dearth of trees in a community portends other issues of justice. Fewer trees means higher temperatures, worse

air quality, decreased resilience to flooding, not to mention the lack of mental health benefits that trees provide. According to [American Forests' Tree Equity Score](#), lower-income areas typically have 26% less tree cover and are exposed to temperatures on average 6°F higher than wealthier neighborhoods. In communities of color, the tree cover disparity increases to 38% and the temperature difference to 13°F.

This connection is a rather simple one. Over the past century, higher-income communities



have benefited from local investment, including tree planting. Lower-income communities have not. So, as those trees grew into a full canopy in the Main Street neighborhoods, the other side of the tracks baked under full sun.

Much like the language shift from food deserts to food apartheid, **we could understand this reality as *tree apartheid***—a reflection not of natural scarcity but of systemic injustice that has created unequal access to the benefits trees provide.

In a time of climate breakdown, the importance of trees is even more evident. They cool cities, mitigate flooding, stabilize soil, filter the air, support psychological wellbeing, create diverse habitats for species, all while pulling carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Trees are climate resilience infrastructure. They are partners in the work of creation justice.

HEALING TREE APARTHEID

While many environmental issues like climate change are sinister problems, tied up in knots of policy, culture, and economics, issues of tree equity have a strikingly simple solution: plant more trees!

There's nothing quite like seeing an area that has been void of canopy, become lush and green once again. The simple act of digging a hole and placing within it a small sapling that will grow to become a life-giving essence for a neighborhood is the physical reminder of what it is to sow the kingdom of heaven in a place. As trees grow, they not only heal the environment

but also have a way of lifting our spirits! Yet, as good as the news is, Jesus reminds us that seeds need soil that's ready, otherwise, the rocks, ravens, and thorns may get in the way.

That readiness begins not with shovels, but with listening. **Before we plant trees, we must plant trust.** The first rule of permaculture applies to community life as well: *observe and interact*. True tree equity grows from relationships. It grows through listening, collaboration, and shared vision, not through outside interventions that replicate old patterns of power. Healing tree apartheid requires dismantling the systems of segregation and

Trees and the Construction of Reality

Beyond their ecological and aesthetic gifts—cooling, shelter, provision, water absorption, and beauty—trees can advance the work of justice by helping us tell the truth about the world we inhabit.

Few things shape our perception of reality as deeply as our surroundings. As philosopher Erazim Kohák observed, the environments we construct profoundly influence how we understand existence itself. Though these human-made settings form only “the thinnest of layers covering the rhythm of living nature,” they are the layer we encounter daily.¹ Our homes, streets, and places of work and play continually teach us who we are and what kind of world we live in.

This illusion is particularly dangerous for those oppressed or marginalized by such human-made systems. When people's environments offer no reminder of the broader reality of creation, it can seem as though their suffering is inevitable and their identity is segregated from God's natural design. In the contexts of these human-constructed layers, communities need the presence and healing voices of those who can break through the deception and re-reveal the greater reality of God's creation. Trees can be among those voices!

1. Kohák, Erazim. *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature*. University of Chicago Press, 1984.

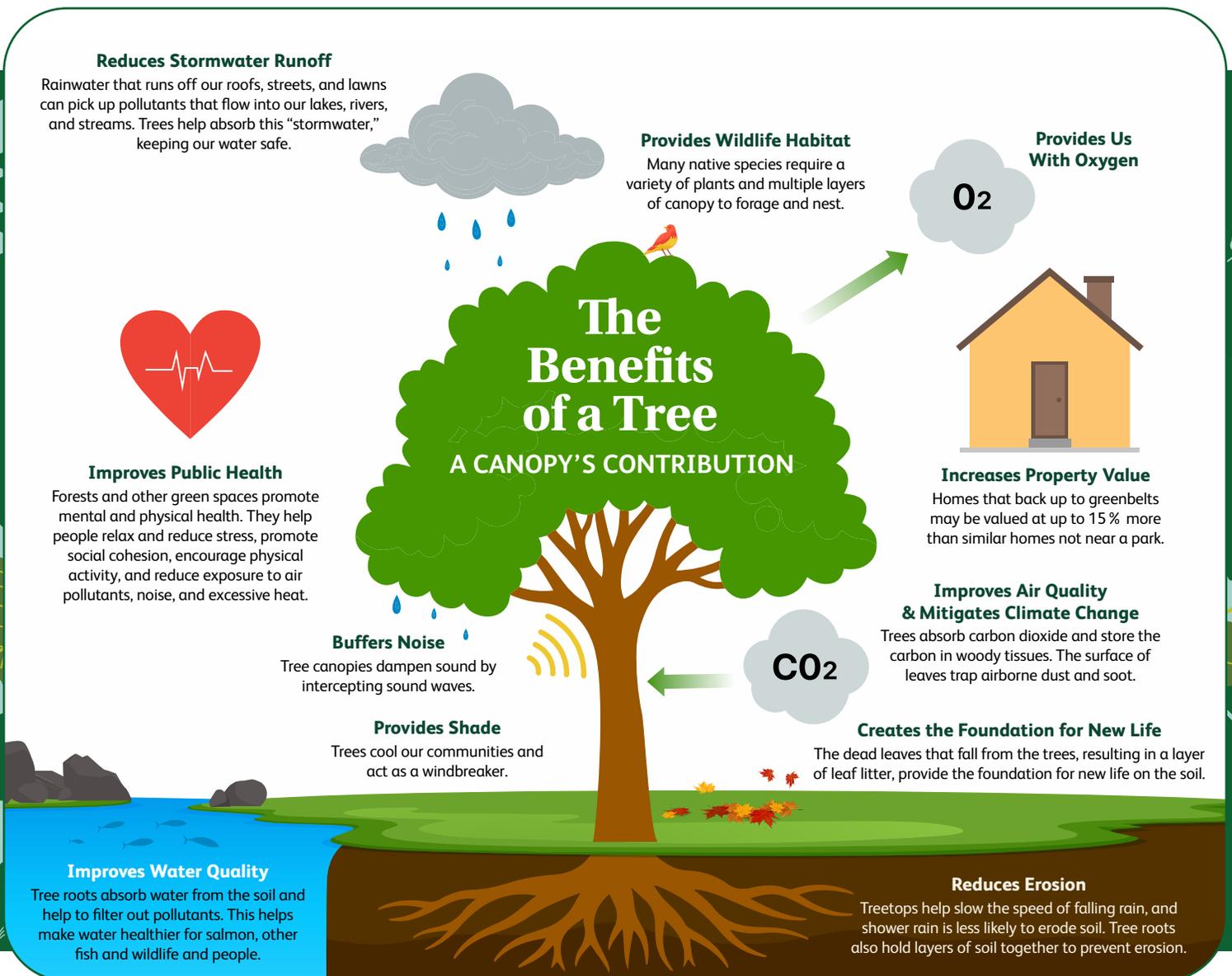
disinvestment that created it.

Tree planting, then, is both ecological and relational work. We must heal our divisions if we hope to cool our streets. We must engage in models of collaborative partnerships rather than colonial rule. We must work with an eye toward social reconciliations as much as environmental restoration. When we create a canopy of love through listening, presence, and patient investment, the shade of oaks, elms, and maples becomes the visible sign of a healed community.

“The leaves of the trees are for the healing of

the nations” (Revelation 22:2). **The leaves of our neighborhoods, too, can become healing for our communities** because they have remained long enough to root, grow, and bear witness.

Finally, the wisdom trees offer extends beyond the moment of planting. They invite us into an arborist spirituality—a way of life that recognizes leaves and bark, that knows how to prune and harvest, and that practices mutual flourishing with the living world. **In the presence of trees, we remember how to live again in relationship with one another and with the canopy of creation that shelters us all.**



THEOLOGICAL FRAMING

How Trees Grow, Heal, and Guide in Scripture



The only members of creation that show up more often in the Bible than trees are humans. There are nearly 300 references to trees and that number balloons up to nearly 4000 when you consider parts of trees or times when trees are used as symbols. From the original trees of creation to the Cedars of Lebanon, to the trees on the Mount of Olives, trees are everywhere in Scripture! Trees have long preceded us and have witnessed our part in creation's story from our earliest days. They have provided the food and material necessary to preserve and maintain life. The biblical witness is bookended by appearances of the tree of life, and for us Christians, the hinge point of biblical history happens when Jesus is on a tree. So what does the ubiquitous nature of trees in Scripture say about our relationship to God?

Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:9)

The first thing we are told about trees is that they add beauty to the world. Trees inspire awe and capture our imagination. Trees have been reproduced in art and have been

the backdrop for some of the great stories in literature and mythology. That God would be concerned with beauty is something worthy of more consideration than it usually receives. Trees are tall and majestic. They are sturdy and strong. They contain beautiful shapes and colors. They even smell nice! (How many types of candles are trying to reproduce the smell of trees?) Being surrounded by trees can inspire both mystery and security. How often is the beauty of creation invoked in discussions about its preservation? We are naturally compelled to care for that which appeals to our aesthetic senses. The pleasure that trees provide is mentioned in the same breath as their being the primary source of food. This speaks to the fact that our needs as humans go beyond the physical. As the old labor song goes: "Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses." For us humans, our needs go beyond just the physical.

From the beginning, it is clear that trees are essential for life. Some version of the Tree of Life exists in many religions, symbolizing a force that creates life, sustains life, and holds the universe together. More than just a source of food, **the Tree of Life is a sign of the Divine presence existing among humans.**

The presence of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is often misunderstood and

even maligned by those who would question why God would set a temptation before Adam and Eve. Yet this tree's function is an important one that continues to echo

The Tree of Life is a sign of the Divine presence existing among humans.





in our day. Less about temptation, the tree is about placing limitations on humanity's consumption. *"Then the LORD God said, 'See, the humans have become like one of us, knowing good and evil, and now they might reach out their hands and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever'"* (Genesis 3:22). God recognizes in this moment that human ambition won't be restrained by its own self limitation so God removes the humans from the Garden. We continue to be haunted by the fallout of not learning to live within the boundaries set by God.

"We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."

(Acts 5:29-31)

While trees were originally a gift from God, they have been unwillingly used to further the unjust ends of humanity. They have been used to build elements of war, clear-cut to be used for commerce, and have been the scenes

of brutality both in the biblical witness and beyond. The beauty of trees has been marred by the violence of hangings, crucifixions, and lynchings. The lyrics of Billie Holliday's haunting tune "Strange Fruit" illustrate the ways that human sinfulness has perverted the beauty of trees in our own country's history:

*Southern Trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the Poplar trees.*

In lynching, the cross becomes the ultimate symbol of how life-giving trees can be used as instruments of death. In his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*², theologian James Cones writes:

The cross and the lynching tree are separated by nearly 2,000 years. One is the universal symbol of Christian faith; the other the quintessential symbol of black oppression in America. Though both symbols of death, one represents a message of hope and salvation while the other signifies the negation of that message by white supremacy. (xiii)

2. Cone, James. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Orbis books, 2011.

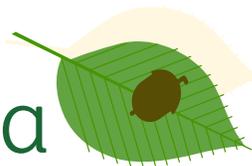
Here Cone juxtaposes two images of trees used as instruments of death, one that has been redeemed by God's act of resurrection, the other still waiting for redemption.

Of course, as Peter made clear in his declaration, the tree that bore witness to the injustice of Jesus' crucifixion has become the instrument of humanity's redemption and reconciliation with God. Trees begin as the giver and sustainers of life and become God's instrument for new life to come into the world. Even the lynching tree can sing a song of redemption.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:1-2)

As the biblical narrative reaches its conclusion, the tree of life is once again a central character, and, again, it is an indicator of God's presence among humanity. Here, in an echo of Ezekiel 47's vision, the tree is not just producing fruit that will nourish and sustain life; **it is using its leaves to heal the brokenness of the nations.** After the devastations witnessed earlier in John's vision, which symbolize the fall of the oppressive and extractive Roman Empire, we have to imagine that this healing is an ecological one as well as a spiritual one. At last, we see the full cycle, trees

Trees are setting the temperature, bringing shade, healing, and renewal to a devastated world.



creating life, sustaining life, and now renewing life. And, as Barbara Rossing mentions in her book *Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, the worries that made God remove the first humans from the Garden of Eden have disappeared. *"The promise to the church in Ephesus is that God's people can now eat of the Tree of Life, a promise of life even better than the Garden of Eden"*(154).³

In his famous Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King argued that the church should be the thermostat for culture, not its thermometer. By this, he meant that it was not enough for us to report the culture's temperature, but we must change it as well. For much of the biblical narrative, trees act as thermometers, reporting the temperature of humanity's faithfulness to God. Both Jesus and John the Baptizer use the metaphor of fruitless trees to show the faithlessness of the religious institutions of the day. **But here in Scripture's final act, trees are setting the temperature, bringing shade, healing, and renewal to a devastated world.** This, it seems, is the role that we need trees to play in our world.

3. Rossing, Barbara. *Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*. Basic Books, 2005.

STORIES

Faith is Planting The Future of God's Creation



Congregations across the country are recognizing that the care of trees is a vital expression of faith and a tangible way to honor God. By reclaiming church grounds and community spaces for reforestation, these congregations do more than plant seeds; they embody a commitment to the healing and preservation of God's Creation for generations to come.

TREVECCA URBAN FARM TREECYCLE PROGRAM / THE EDEN PROJECT

Contributed by Rev. Caleb Cray Haynes, Director and co-founder of Nazarenes for Creation Care.

On a cold Thursday afternoon in December, a dozen middle school students arrive at a local church in Nashville bundled in coats and gloves, ready to plant nearly forty trees. They have only a short window between school dismissal and the setting winter sun, but these youth are prepared for action. After two to three months of planting events earlier in the fall, they know what they're doing—and why it matters. These students are part of **TreeCycle**, a program birthed out of **Trevecca Nazarene University's Urban Farm**

that equips local youth to ride bikes and plant trees in Nashville neighborhoods.

Two crises are co-occurring in our world today: an ecological crisis and a growing disconnection between children and the natural world. Research highlighted by Jonathan Haidt in *The Anxious Generation* points to the consequences of over-protecting children from outdoor risk while under-protecting them in the digital realm. Decades ago, children spent far more time outside, immersed in the natural world. Today, technological entertainment dominates their attention, contributing to rising anxiety and detachment from place. At the same time, the world our children are inheriting is losing



its ecological balance. Neighborhoods are experiencing shrinking tree canopy, access to good food is uneven, and healthy soil is disappearing. TreeCycle responds to both crises at once, inviting young people outdoors, tools in hand, to restore local ecosystems and embody hope through action.

Through Trevecca Urban Farm's TreeCycle program, middle and high school students learn the practical importance of tree planting



and care, tree equity, and soil health. As a grant-funded initiative, participants are even paid for their work. Youth ages 12 to 18 earn money while contributing to the wellbeing of their communities, modeling a form of empowerment rooted both economically and ecologically. Participants can also join the bike program, where they learn how to ride, repair, and maintain bicycles while taking part in conservation-focused group rides. Through the program's bike shop, students gain hands-on experience using tools and building mechanical skills that foster confidence and problem-solving. In a climate-changed world,

cultivating a bike culture among youth supports clean transportation and more equitable access to neighborhoods and resources.

A major component of TreeCycle addresses food insecurity and economic barriers that limit access to healthy, nutritious food. Planting fruit trees is central to this work. Peaches, pears, plums, apples, and pawpaws are already bearing fruit in neighborhoods surrounding the Urban Farm, where the program has been

active for nearly eight years. These trees—and the knowledge that accompanies them—continue to nourish communities as living signs of the good news of God's kingdom.

Building on this foundation, Trevecca Urban Farm launched the Eden Project in 2025, a tree equity initiative focused on the southeastern United States. The Eden Project partners

with congregations across the region to establish youth-driven tree planting efforts in disadvantaged communities. Over three years, Trevecca Urban Farm will work with churches to plant 400 trees while expanding environmental education and career development opportunities for participating youth.

It is exciting to imagine churches engaging young people in this kind of healing work—care for creation woven together with discipleship, justice, and hope. More information about the Eden Project can be found at: <https://blog.trevecca.edu/news/trevecca-urban-farm-announces-regional-tree-planting-initiative>.



MENNONITES SEEK PEACE WITH CREATION THROUGH TREE PLANTING

Contributed by Kirstin De Mello, climate advocacy and education coordinator, Mennonite Central Committee U.S.

One Mennonite organization has a goal of planting one million trees by 2030. Churches, families, communities and businesses are making this happen.

Founded in 1950, Mennonite Men has long been a way for men in Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada to serve Anabaptist communities. In 2019, Mennonite Men director Steve Thomas was asked by a fellow Anabaptist to “mobilize an army of tree planters.” Thomas, a pastor and arborist, was deeply concerned about climate change and understood the role trees play in drawing down carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. He thought of questions his future grandchildren might ask him: “Did you know about global

warming? What did you do about it?” He wanted to be able to answer, “Yes, I knew about it, and this is what we did about it.” With encouragement from others, that concern for the planet and future generations propelled him into action.

The seed of **JoinTrees** was planted. In 2020, Mennonite Men expanded its mission to respond to climate change through tree planting. With the ambitious goal of planting one million trees in ten years, JoinTrees encourages individuals, businesses and churches to plant trees on land they are connected with. Through donations from Anabaptist churches and grants, JoinTrees has been able to provide funding and trees to help mitigate global warming, restore ecosystems, increase biodiversity, and support vulnerable communities.

So far, 16 Mennonite churches in the U.S. have engaged with the JoinTrees campaign, planting over 6,000 trees. Harrisonburg

Mennonite Church in Virginia planted 1,000 trees on what used to be a grass lawn surrounding their church building, benefiting both the church community and the surrounding neighborhood. At Berkey Avenue Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana, families joined together on Good Friday in 2022 to plant nearly one acre of land with 795 trees as a symbol of hope and resurrection.

The vision of JoinTrees is a “healthy, thriving planet where God’s abundant life of shalom flourishes in the community of creation from generation to generation.” For JoinTrees, this means nurturing peace with our Creator and with all of creation. The wellbeing of an ecosystem—shaped by the health of its water, air, and soil—is essential for peace, and trees are central to the health of most ecosystems. JoinTrees invites people to live out their call to serve and protect God’s creation by planting trees.

Turning this vision into reality takes persistence. As an urban forestry liaison for the city of Goshen, Indiana, Thomas says his toughest work is convincing businesses to plant trees. In industrial parks, workers often endure hot, poorly ventilated conditions. While businesses may initially resist spending money on trees, Thomas has found that the benefits often outweigh the costs by nearly four to one. Trees reduce cooling costs, improve working conditions, and lower heat- and pollution-related illnesses, decreasing staff turnover.

Community ownership is another key ingredient in successful planting projects. In Baja Verapaz, Guatemala, villagers sought to plant trees in deforested areas to prevent erosion and landslides. Along with the U.S.-based nonprofit Empowering Projects for



International Cooperation (EPIC) and the Guatemalan Mayan foundation Fundomarcos, JoinTrees supported 14 villages to plant more than 38,000 trees. Families grew trees from seed and planted them on steep hillsides. One community member, Manuela Avila Velasquez, shared, “I feel happy because the trees that we grew on our land will be there for the children on their land.”

JoinTrees also encourages Mennonite congregations to calculate their carbon footprint and contribute to Mennonite Men to offset their emissions. Congregations that support plantings in places like Baja Verapaz respond to a moral call to share resources and care for neighbors who experience the greatest impacts of climate change.

As of early 2026, the JoinTrees campaign is one third of the way toward planting one million trees by 2030. Each project reflects the unique needs of its community, and every piece of land planted can become a place that nurtures and sustains creation.

Learn more about JoinTrees at mennonitemen.org/jointrees and explore the part you can play.

ACTION AND ADVOCACY

Next Steps to Caring for the Canopy



In order to effectively address tree apartheid across the country and strengthen our tree canopy, we need leaders at all levels of government to prioritize funding programs that not only promote tree conservation, but also expand tree plantings.

To ensure solutions and projects are equitable, it is imperative to address legacies of racial injustice from historic policies like redlining. Research has shown that institutionalized, race-based practices have had lasting impacts on public health, neighborhood investment, and generational wealth. Planting trees in these

communities can alleviate some of these burdens.

Conserving tree canopies is essential for protecting public health, while also reducing long term economic impacts on families by lowering energy costs. Countless studies have demonstrated that strong tree canopies and access to trees can increase resilience to worsening heat waves, while also enhancing quality of life by improving physical and mental health. Because these benefits are often most lacking in historically underserved communities, nurturing tree cover is an important act of environmental justice.

ACTIONS

UNDERSTAND YOUR COMMUNITY'S TREE CANOPY



Consider using digital tools like American Forest's Tree Equity Score (treeequityscore.org), which helps identify where urban tree infrastructure is needed the most, or iTree (itreetools.org) to estimate your community's tree canopy and its benefits, including carbon dioxide uptake, storm water mitigation, and air pollution removal. These data are a great resource to bring to lawmakers about the importance of building tree canopies in communities that may be lacking.

ENCOURAGE YOUR MUNICIPALITY TO MAP YOUR COMMUNITY'S TREE COVERAGE AND HEAT RISK



In addition to using digital tools to understand existing data about tree cover, consider advocating for updated tree cover studies, heat mapping studies, and/or tree climate risk assessments to be conducted by your city, town, or local academic and technical partners. Understanding the area of greatest need and planting potential around the community can help your city better inform decisions, protect existing trees and set new targets. Assessing tree health,

age, and species diversity can help the community plan for a warmer future with changes to storms, pests, and diseases.

IDENTIFY ANY COMMUNITY PLAYERS



Many communities have local organizations, non-profits or agencies who are committed to planting trees and promoting tree conservation. Identifying who is actively involved, or who may be missing, is an important step to understanding potential allies. To get started, check out the Arbor Day Foundation's network at arborday.org/network-directory.

ADVOCATE FOR MORE FUNDING



Budgets are moral documents that dictate priorities across all levels of government. You can play a role in addressing tree apartheid by advocating for more community funding to plant trees.

Funding tree equity programs can help support planting and caring for trees in low-canopy, historically underserved neighborhoods, which suffer disproportionately from urban heat islands, poor air quality, and related health problems, as well as stormwater issues. These funds are imperative to address long standing issues of environmental justice.

During the federal budget process, individual members of Congress can request funding for a specific project by “ear-marking” the funds. Earmarks, also known as “congressionally directed spending” or “community project funding,” allow legislators to allocate funding to specific projects in their jurisdiction. Funds can be used for spending at the request of a member who must submit a certification letter explaining the purpose of the funds. An earmark is authorized via a provision written into an appropriation bill that directs a specific amount of money to a certain entity for a project. If your community has financial

WRITE TO YOUR MEMBERS OF CONGRESS:

To use this letter effectively:

- **Personalize** it by adding your name and church community.
- **Address** it to your specific U.S. Representative or Senator (you can find their contact information on congress.gov).
- **Consider** adding a personal story or local example to emphasize how these laws impact your community.
- **Send** your letter via email, an online submission form, or traditional mail to ensure it reaches your legislator’s office.

Dear [Representative/Senator] [Member of Congress’ Last Name],

I am writing to urge you to prioritize the public health of my neighbors by funding programs that protect and build the tree canopy in our communities. Tree canopies play a vital role in safeguarding public health, conserving local ecosystems and lowering utility costs.

As a Christian, I believe we are called to protect and restore God’s Creation with care and equity. Protecting our trees, and expanding tree canopies, can increase resilience to worsening heat waves, while also enhancing quality of life by improving physical and mental health. These benefits are most lacking in historically underserved communities, where many are faced with a higher burden of pollution and rising energy costs.

Funding programs that advance tree equity is essential to addressing legacies of systemic injustice. Such programs can support planting and caring for trees in low-canopy, historically underserved neighborhoods, which suffer disproportionately from urban heat islands, poor air quality, and related health problems, as well as stormwater issues.

Key agencies like the U.S. Forest Service play a vital role in maintaining the health of our nation’s trees and protecting the ecosystems that rely on them. The U.S. government should prioritize robust funding to ensure the Forest Service is fully staffed to do its job effectively and sustainably.

In summary, I urge you to commit to funding:

- Tree Equity Programs to help our neighbors build climate resiliency and reduce their utility bills
- Fully fund key agencies, like the U.S. Forest Service to protect our trees

Thank you for your leadership in protecting God’s creation and the communities that rely on it.

Sincerely,
[Your Name]

needs to begin a tree planting project, consider meeting with your members of Congress to

discuss the possibility of earmarked funds in the federal budget.



RESOURCES

YOU CAN USE TO GROW

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Creation Justice Ministries' partners at the Center for Spirituality have created a spiritual resource guide centered around trees. The purpose of the resource is to help users develop mindful spiritual practices for tree planting or just spending time with and among trees. It is designed for use by all ages. A link to the resource can be found at creationjustice.org/canopyofcreation.

Sermon Starter

Ezekiel 47:1-12

Written by Rev. Molly Brummet Wudel

“Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing.”

TREES AS VISION

Many consider Ezekiel 47 to be utopian literature. It is a part of the “temple vision” in Ezekiel. Like the majority of this book, it is both political and personal. In this vision, we find critique and hope, revelation and possibility with a vision making God’s tangible presence undeniable. This vision reveals what can be if those who are hearing (or reading) this story, those who wrestle and immerse themselves in it, dare to see.

“Human one, have you seen this?”

This question from the messenger invites Ezekiel to see the utopia in front of him, yes, but perhaps also see the complex realities that have gotten Ezekiel to this vision, too. Perhaps Ezekiel can only see this utopian vision because he’s borne witness to the horrors of living through an oppressive empire full of unfathomable destruction, and deep pain, too.

It can be easier to want to draw our eyes, spirit, and energy to see only utopia—the good, the promising, the lush, the hope-filled and skim past the pain, the oppression, the destruction. But perhaps we cannot fully see, live, and work toward God’s utopian vision and promise without daring to see the fullness of all that is.

Trees too often are used as sites to claim utopia, grandeur, new life, and the fostering of lush ecosystems without holding the ways trees are far more nuanced, complex, and even sites of destruction and death. How might our preaching and our seeing be transformed if we not only preach the grandeur and life-giving nature of trees, but hold that grandeur alongside trees’ complexity and frailty? How might holding all these realities of trees—in tension, in possibility, in truth—actually foster within us the ability to live and work towards the world Ezekiel dreams of and the one which God continually invites us to be about?

Sermon Starter

Acts 10:34-43

We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. **They put him to death by hanging him on a tree**, but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

TREES AS WITNESS

Repeatedly in the narrative of Acts, the crucifixion of Jesus is referred to by saying that Jesus was hung from a tree. It is interesting wording that brings creation into the biblical narrative at its darkest point. The “tree” is forced by the machinations of empire to do something that is largely against its nature. Instead of being a support for the maintenance of life, this tree aids in its taking.

Paul says in Galatians *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’”*. Paul is referencing Deuteronomy 21:21-22

“When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you must bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse. You must not defile the land that the Lord your God is giving you for possession.”

(emphasis added)

Putting these texts together, we see that humans are capable of defiling the goodness of trees with our violence. Examples of such defiling are not hard to find in the history of this country. And yet the good news of this text, which often appears as an Easter reading, is that the curse of the cross is not a permanent curse. The defilement of the land can be undone. New life is possible, for us and for the trees that have been subjected to the whims of a violent humanity.

Like Peter’s original audience, we are being called to acts of repentance. That begins by acknowledging the ways that we have made trees and other elements of nature a party to our cruelty.

Worship Resource

As we consider the role that trees play in our world, we'd like to also invite you to consider the roles that trees can play in worship. We encourage you to find ways to make trees central to your worship service, including worshipping alongside them. The following resources are offered as potential resources that can be used in your worship and prayer services.

As an ecumenical organization we understand that “worship” takes many forms so we invite you to use and adapt these resources in a way that best fits your worship context.

CALL TO WORSHIP *(based on Psalms 96, 104, 148)*

Leader: Praise the Lord!

**All: I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.**

Praise the Lord from the heavens;
Praise the Lord, sun and moon, and all you shining stars!

**I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.**

Praise the Lord from the earth,
Praise the Lord you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, and stormy wind. —Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!

**I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.**

Let heaven celebrate! Let the earth rejoice!
Let the sea and everything in it roar!
Let the countryside and everything in it celebrate!
Then all the trees of the forest too
will shout out joyfully before the Lord because the Lord is coming!
The Lord is coming to establish justice on the earth!

**I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.**

Let us pray, ...

Holy God, We come this day with praise in our hearts and songs on our tongues. We join all creation - from the sun, moon, and stars to the wild animals, mountains and trees - in praising your holy name.

Holy Spirit, through this worship, move in us and through us. Strengthen our connections to each other and to the natural world so that we recognize creatures great and small, and rivers, hills, and trees as our siblings.

Christ our Lord, embolden us to be doers of justice in our local communities and to the ends of the earth so that all people and all creation may know your love and mercy.

In the name of the incarnate Jesus we pray,
Amen

Worship Resource

A PRAYER OF GRATITUDE FOR TREES

Dear God, we thank you for your marvelous trees.

Teach us to see your face reflected in each one. Their provision of food, shade, air purification, a source of medical compounds to heal our bodies and enhance our mental health, their ability to break up rocks to form soil, their interaction with webs of fungi miles long, their capacity to cool and cleanse the earth, and so much more, is a testament to the marvelous creation that is trees.

It is a testimony to the incredible creator that you are!

Your glory is truly reflected in your creation.

We come before you with gratitude for the many ways that trees care for us and enrich our lives.

They teach us of your love for your world and the undeserved kindness you continue to show us.

Loving God, we thank you for knowing the needs of your world and meeting them so thoroughly through trees.

May we reciprocate your goodness with respect and care towards your trees.

In Jesus' name,

Amen

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Precious God, we humbly come before you this day.

We acknowledge that all creation comes from and is a reflection of you.

Lush trees created to provide food, shelter, and protection for creatures as you intended. Their roots break down hard rock to form soil and filter pollutants from runoff, while maintaining the air balance through photosynthesis. They stretch their branches out to you in worship and adoration.

By your creative will and design, all life forms took shape out of your holy breath - each for its particular purpose and yet all interdependent.

May we remember that before we became different races, ethnicities, and genders, we were cocooned in your holy creative intent alongside the possibility of all creation that was to come - all of us fearfully and wonderfully made, our very design and purpose glorifying you.

Our hearts are heavy with grief at the harm we cause our human and nonhuman kin.

We ask your forgiveness.

We pray for ourselves and all people to repent and change our consumeristic ways.

Beloved creator-God, through your power that is as gentle as a lamb and as capable as to call worlds into being, we ask that you speak to all hearts to change our ways.

In Jesus' name,

Amen

Worship Resource

PRAYER OF LAMENT

Creation calls to us.

To open our eyes to the devastation we have and are causing our earthly home.
The harm being done to trees, soils, oceans, air, and so much more.

Creation reminds us.

To recognize our oneness with all beings, human and non-human.

Creation calls to us.

To value the community of creation above human greed.

Creation is waiting for us.

To move from doing what is easy to doing
what is necessary and right.

Creation is waiting for us.

To prioritize the needs of community over the
convenience of self, for loving each other is a seed of hope.

Creation hurts and aches, and is lashing out!

She asks that we stop polluting, and remove the pollution from our seas, land, air,
bodies and hearts.

Creation longs for us.

To lament over the devastation of war; the lives lost; Earth, the destruction of her
land, and the assault on her climate.

To be like the mustard tree seed that grows into a glorious tree in which a myriad of
creatures, including human beings, find shelter, food, and protection.

Creation is waiting for us but will not wait forever.

In all these things and more, creation waits
for us to remember our connection to it, before technology and self-sufficiency
distanced us, before our creaturely instincts became dull behind concrete walls.

Oh God we ask for radical courage.

To remember that we are creation within creation,
For truly nature sustains us.
Moreover, nature is God's face too - mottled with chlorophyll, adorned in foliage,
dusted with feathers, and dewy in morning light.

May we be moved.

To assume our roles as creation's servants and protect it.
To know that we are a human and nonhuman family, inhabiting the same home.

Amen, Amen.

Songs

LIKE A TREE

Graham Kendrick © (Year) Make Way Music. grahamkendrick.co.uk International copyright secured. All rights reserved. Used by permission Sheet music available at <https://grahamkendrick.co.uk/like-a-tree/>

Like a tree by the water
I will reach for heaven on high
Here by the stream my roots travel deep
This river will never run dry

Every season I will stand
In the Winter, Spring or Summer,
When the storm winds bend me down
I will lift my head I know my anchor holds

Like a tree by the water
I will reach for heaven on high
Here by the stream my roots travel deep
This river will never run dry

In a dry and barren land
Through the drought I will not wither
There'll be harvest from your hand
Though we sow in tears we'll reap with shouts of joy

Like a tree by the water
I will reach for heaven on high
Here by the stream my roots travel deep
This river will never run dry

Bridge:
I delight in the law of the Lord
Day and night in the Word of the Lord
I delight in the law of the Lord
Day and night in your Word O my Lord
But the wicked will not stand
Will not stand

Like a tree by the water
I will reach for heaven on high
Here by the stream my roots travel deep
This river will never run dry

Like a tree by the water
I will reach for heaven on high
Here by the stream my roots travel deep
This river will never run dry

O CROSS OF CHRIST IMMORTAL TREE

Author unknown. Sheet music available at <https://www.godsongs.net/2011/09/o-cross-of-christ-immortal-tree.html>

O Cross of Christ, immortal tree
On which our Saviour died,
The world is sheltered by your arms
That bore the Crucified.

From bitter death and barren wood
the tree of life is made;
Its branches bear unfailing fruit
And leaves that never fade.

O faithful Cross, you stand unmoved

While ages run their course;
Foundation of the universe,
Creation's minding force.

Give glory to the risen Christ
And to his Cross give praise,
The sign of God's unfailing love,
The hope of all our days.

Songs

JOIN THE TREES IN PRAISE

Written by eight songwriters who participated in a retreat at Sister Grove Farm in Van Alstyne, Texas.

In September 2024, “The Sister Grove Collective” consisted of Ken Medema, John and Alyssa Creasy, Thomas Graham, Julian Reid, Lindy Thompson, Darrell Adams and Mark Miller.

Recordings and sheet music can be found at creationjustice.org/canopyofcreation

We are a part of the world
Not the center of it
We are a part of the world
Not apart from it Not apart from it

God give humility and creativity
To join the trees in praise
JOIN THE TREES IN PRAISE

We are a part of the world
Not the center of it
We are a part of the world
Not apart from it Not apart from it

God give humility and creativity
To join the trees in praise
JOIN THE TREES IN PRAISE

Our children come after us
They must live with what we leave
Our children come after us
They will share this air we breathe
We are a part of the world
Not the center of it
We are a part of the world
Not apart from it Not apart from it

God give humility and creativity
To join the trees in praise
JOIN THE TREES IN PRAISE

Jesus of the redwood trees
Jesus of the bumblebees
Heal us, help us heal the earth

Jesus of the mountain high
Jesus of the soaring sky

Heal us, help us heal the earth
Jesus of the ocean deep
Jesus of the coral reef
Heal us, help us heal the earth

Jesus of the mighty gale
Jesus of the humpback whale
(Heal us, help us heal the earth 3x)

We are a part of the world
Not the center of it
We are a part of the world
Not apart from it Not apart from it

God give humility and creativity
To join the trees in praise
JOIN THE TREES IN PRAISE!

O GOD, YOU MADE THE TREES

By Carolyn Gillette (to the tune of “This is My Father’s World”), Tune: Traditional English melody

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Email: carolynshymns@gmail.com New Hymns: www.carolynshymns.com

O God, You Made the Trees was written for Presbyterians for Earth Care’s collection of online articles about trees.

O God, you made the trees! The oak and Douglas fir,
the maple, beech, and sweetgum reach their branches
heavenward.
The willow, growing wide — the redwood, tall and
strong —
and cedar trees! Yes, all of these sing out creation’s song.

You made each living thing to give and to receive.
As roots grow down into the ground, they twist and
interweave.
A canopy of green restores and cools the air.
Great branches shade the earth you made, and dance —
as if in prayer.

How often we forget the forests and their worth!
We lay cement on places meant to be the lungs of earth.
For profit and for gain, we build and build some more;
We cut down woods in neighborhoods of people who
are poor.

O God, you made the trees — the apple and the pine.
You made them all and still you call: “Take care of what
is mine!”
May we receive your gift and give ourselves anew
to do our best, as we’ve been blessed, to care for trees for
you.

Children's Resource

Tree Activity

INTRODUCTION

Use this space to spark conversations about trees, using these optional intro points:

- We are people of the trees. Trees shape our lives. From our earliest memories, we are climbing, swinging from, and carving our names in trees.
- Trees outlive us, outgrow us, and are stronger than we are.
- In trees, we find resilience and refuge. Trees offer us food to eat, medicine for our bodies, habitats for wildlife, and shade on hot summer days.
- Trees give us oxygen to breathe, water vapor to cool the air, and roots to stabilize the soil.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT TREES?

Choose 1 or incorporate multiple. Note: Text is for background for leader to understand context

Before the first coming of Jesus, the Temple represented the presence of God. In Ezekiel chapters 46–47, a river flows out eastward from the presence of the Lord. *“Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing”* (Ezekiel 47:12).

After the second coming of Jesus, there is no need for a Temple, *“because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple”* (Rev. 21:22). In addition, the glory of God gives the new City its light and the nations will walk according to this light. *“The kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ... The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful ...”* (Rev. 21:23-27).

As Israel was returning to its land and receiving instructions for developing it into a fruitful and peaceful place to live, Ezekiel’s prophecy would have given comfort and encouragement to the people. Ezekiel’s word picture would have reminded them of the psalmist’s similar promise that the person *“whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on [God’s] law day and night ... is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers”* (Psalm 1:2, 3)—international development!

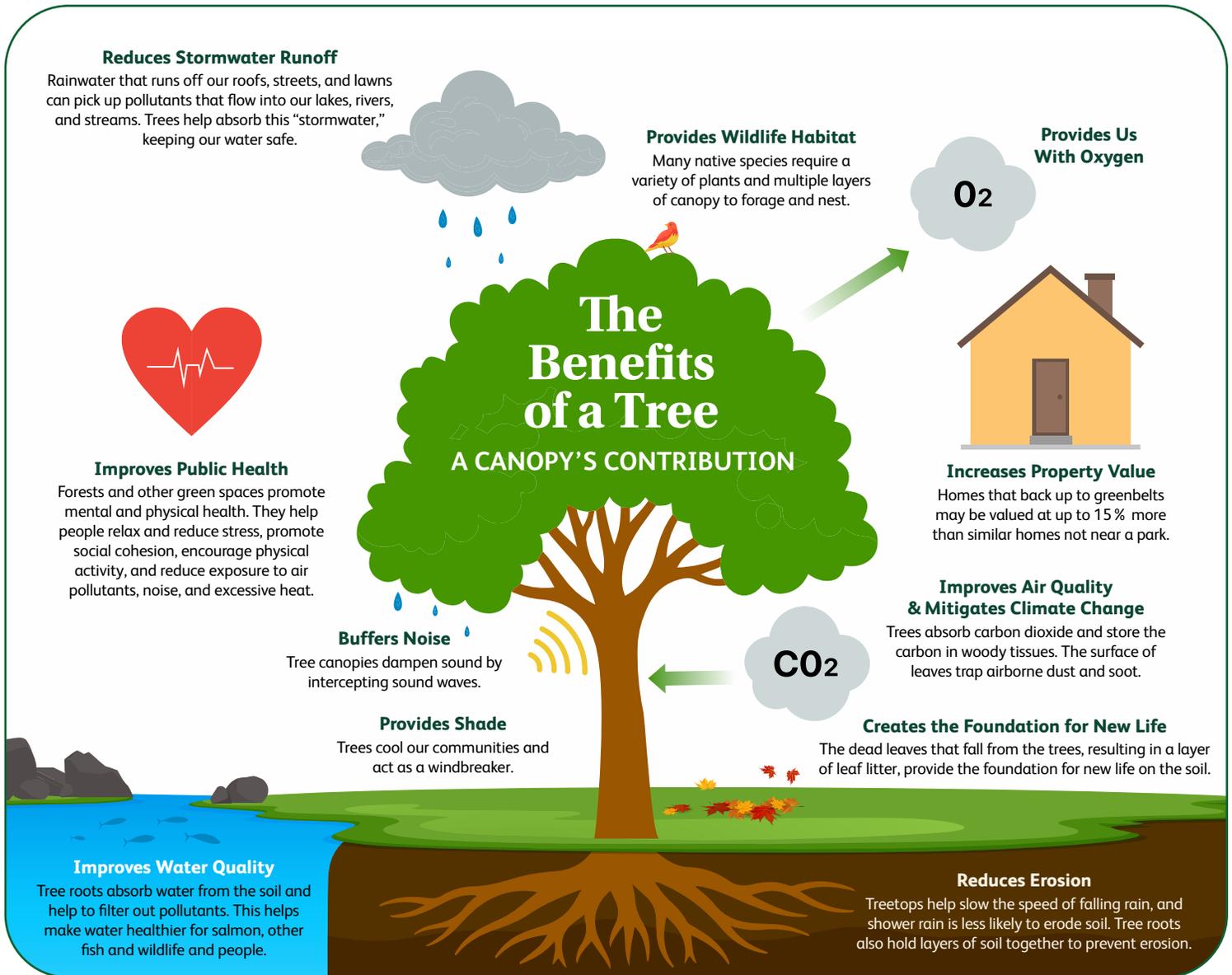
This is a picture of a fully “developed” world. In this world, as in Ezekiel’s prophetic foretaste, a river flows out from the presence of God and *“on each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations”* (Rev. 22:2).

Continued on Page 28

Children's Resource

WHAT DO TREES DO FOR US?

Use Infographic below



Download this resource at creationjustice.org/canopyofcreation.

Sample Responses: "Catches carbon." "Keeps it cool." "Cleans the air." "Makes us feel happy!"

WHAT CAN WE DO FOR TREES?

Optional Question depending on tone of conversation

Sample Responses: "Plant trees where there needs to be shade." "Care for young trees so they can grow strong." "Learn which trees are native to our place."

Children's Resource

Book Activity

SUPPLIES:

Books with tree themes- some suggestions to get you started:

- **“The Lorax” by Dr. Seuss:** A classic story about a creature who speaks for the trees against a greedy industrialist. It highlights the negative consequences of deforestation and environmental destruction.
- **“Wangari’s Trees of Peace” by Jeanette Winter:** This is a picture book biography of Wangari Maathai, a Nobel Peace Prize winner who started a movement to plant trees in Kenya.
- **“Amrita’s Tree” in The Barefoot Book of Earth Tales by Dawn Casey:** Based on a true story, this tale features a young girl who physically defends her special tree by wrapping her body around it, stopping the woodcutters from felling the forest.
- **“The Great Kapok Tree” by Lynne Cherry:** A man goes into the Amazon rainforest to chop down a tree, but is stopped by a variety of animals who show him the importance of their home.

Paper

Writing Utensils (crayons, markers, colored pencils, etc)

ACTIVITY STEPS

1. Break the participants into small groups (suggested 4-6 per group)
2. Assign a reader or multiple readers of the book to each group
3. Spend 10 minutes reading the books (a larger room to spread out in would be best)
4. Stay in small groups: hand out paper and writing utensils
5. Give everyone 10 minutes to draw or write about the book they just read
6. Come back together at the end. Allow each group to share what they read and what they made

Discussion Guide

This discussion guide is designed to engage small groups and/or congregations in further conversation in ways that they can continue to fight against tree apartheid.

We also invite you to explore our online supplement to this resource which includes a comprehensive guide on planting trees in your community. You can find this guide and other resources at creationjustice.org/canopyofcreation.

- **The only members of creation that show up more often in the Bible than trees are humans.** There are nearly 300 biblical references to trees. How many biblical trees can you name? Can you find scripture references for them?
- **Can you remember a time you have been struck by the beauty of a tree?** If you're comfortable, please share that memory.
- **Trees have been unwillingly used to further the unjust ends of humanity.** Have you thought about how human consumption and activity had marred the beauty and function of trees?
- **For much of the biblical narrative, trees act as thermometers, reporting the temperature of humanity's faithfulness to God.** How have trees been a barometer of your community's faithfulness to God?
- **Where are the trees in your neighborhood? How many are there?** Are there so few you can count, are they plentiful? How have the tree, or lack of trees in your neighborhood been a barometer for the state of your community?
- **Who made/makes the decisions about tree infrastructure in your community?** Can you identify a relationship between their city planning and their vision for the people in the community?
- **Scripture Focus: Read the following passages.** Discuss how you may read or understand these passages differently given the need for tree justice.
 - Genesis 2
 - Revelation 21:1-22:7



CREATION JUSTICE MINISTRIES

Care for God's Planet and People.

MISSION:

**Creation Justice Ministries educates, equips,
and mobilizes Christian individuals, congregations,
denominations, and communions to protect, restore,
and rightly share God's creation.**

VISION:

A world where all of God's creation thrives.

Our Member communions and denominations include:

Alliance of Baptists	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
African Methodist Episcopal Church	Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church	Mennonite Central Committee
American Baptists Churches USA	National Baptist Convention, USA
Armenian Church in America	Orthodox Church in America
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	Philadelphia Yearly Meeting
Christian Methodist Episcopal Church	The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Church of the Brethren	Progressive National Baptist Convention
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship	The Reformed Church in America
Ecumenical Catholic Communion	The United Church of Christ
The Episcopal Church	The United Methodist Church



Contact our team for additional resources and more information.

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CREATION JUSTICE MINISTRIES

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