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# Learning from the Wisdom of the Creator to Restore Communities and Churches

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a lockdown to many churches. While the lockdown was mourned by many, it provided an opportunity—a permission, if you will—to implement creative ways for people to enjoy community. For example, during the summer of 2020, my family and I became a part of a backyard fellowship. We fell in love with the community aspect of this group of believers, enjoying multigenerational worship and preaching out in nature, followed by meals and fellowship. However, when the cold weather arrived and the worship was no longer in nature, my wife requested that we not join the house-church meetings. While I did not fully understand her decision, I complied.

When visiting our native country (the Czech Republic) during the summer of 2021, we had the rare chance to spend the weekend with just the two of us because our 10-year-old son was visiting friends for a couple of days. While not having any mission meetings or activities scheduled, I thought we would go to my wife's home church in Prague for Sabbath worship. My wife surprised me on Saturday morning by insisting we go out (not using any other transportation than our feet) and instead spend the whole day in a beautiful botanical garden. It was a wonderful sunny day, so we walked through the garden, chatted, observed, and listened to nature, and just sat reading the Bible on our own or together. Although I had initially felt a little uneasy about breaking away from our usual habit of attending church on a Sabbath morning (which was located in the middle of a concrete jungle) there was something special about the day spent in nature.

For some time, there has been a prompting in my soul to study more and write about ways in which nature can help develop church community and life in a healthier way. These experiences and reading books dealing with nature, well-being, and church life in nature provided a push for that to happen. While researching this topic I realized, to my amazement, that my wife—intuitively—was onto something much bigger than I imagined.

We gray-haired people usually appreciate nature in some way because of the memories from our childhood. We remember Mom and Dad working in a garden, walking to school through a valley, observing the beautiful night sky filled with stars—these are precious memories. Some of us take care of little gardens growing tomatoes, peppers, carrots, herbs, etc. However, I personally never fully realized how important these activities were, not just for our physical, emotional, or spiritual health, but also for gaining a better understanding of God the Creator and relating to the teachings in the Bible.

This realization grew on me as I watched multiple videos and read the newly-acquired books, written by authors of various backgrounds—scientists, pastors, foresters, nature activists, etc. While I could not always identify with the authors' worldview assumptions, I learned that each of them has valuable points worth hearing. These broadened my horizon to begin connecting the dots in my understanding of God, spirituality, and church life in connection with nature.

In this article, I do not necessarily promote ecological activism within the Adventist Church, although it would not be off the grid in view of Adventism's holistic teachings and approach to life. I also do not want to focus on the health benefits of being more closely connected with nature, although there are some exciting scientific findings in this area. Finally, I do not want to push a "nature religion" that cultivates "feelings of belonging and connection to the earth" (Taylor 2009:5), as this direction may cause people to fall into the trap of paganism, animism, and/or pantheism.

In the following pages, I want to present arguments to sensitize people to what God is teaching through creation (i.e., what we can learn from nature). The authors of the Bible drew from and referred to God's nature in their writings; thus, it makes sense that we too continue to learn from nature beyond the pages of Scripture in light of current science (if it does not contradict biblical truths, of course). It is my understanding, however, that even if there was no science and our access to the Creator's wisdom revealed in nature was limited only to the pages of Scripture, there would be plenty of nature topics that beg for our attention such as a theology of wilderness, trees, plants, animals, or the human heart; however, I will leave that task to a new generation of systematic theologians and biblical scholars.

My task, as a missiologist, is to contribute to the topic (lessons from nature) from a multi-disciplinary perspective, as it applies to the mission/ministry of the church. When people dive into the realm of nature through the lenses of scientific discoveries (medical, psychological, biological, neuroscientific, etc.), a number of biblical texts begin to shed new light on various topics. For example, Job's dispute with God, David's nature-focused poems (found in the book of Psalms), and Jesus' teaching about the kingdom all rely heavily on themes from nature.

Since graduate studies at Andrews University, my thinking has been influenced and shaped by the Natural Church Development philosophy. I became convinced that to be able to apply the Bible well and grow a healthy church, it was important to implement a multi-disciplinary approach to the Bible that included more than just what theological analysis, research, or science could provide. Along with Scripture, nature provides a text for learning about God, his will, and his ways. Nature is still relevant for us today, as we seek to grow healthy, wholesome churches.

For many, a connection with nature has become increasingly difficult. Unfortunately, as civilization and technology progress, the gap between people and nature widens. Victoria Loorz points out that "we humans in the Western world have built walls so thick between us and the rest of the world that we can no longer feel the vulnerability that we actually share with all the others" (2021:151). Despite our holistic, biblical understanding, many tend to hold an "old view of nature as a big machine, a soulless system" (Wohlleben 2021:154).

Increased urbanization within the Western world has also taken its toll. Research has shown that people who live in urban settings spend as much as 93% of their time indoors or in vehicles (Williams 2017:3). "Regular—or any—experience of wilderness is missing from most of our modern lives" (Haupt 2021:15). Also, "American and British children today spend half as much time outdoors as their parents did. Instead, they spend up to seven hours a day on screens, not including time in school" (Williams 2017:4). Research shows that people in such conditions even "avoid nearby nature because a chronic disconnection from nature causes them to underestimate its . . . benefits" (3). Even agnostic writer Peter Wohlleben admits that "the artificial world of the city offers all kinds of stimuli for which we were not originally designed" (2021:156).

Our individualistic and hedonistic cultural values only add to the problem. The ever-popular concept of individualism as a basis for achieving the American dream only deepens the disconnect between people themselves, as well as people and nature. "A false belief system of separation and dominance is opposed to every system of life, with disastrous consequences ecologically, spiritually, culturally, socially, economically. . . . These

worldviews are so deeply embedded that it takes a lot of effort to even see them, much less change them” (Loorz 2021:9). Because we are “losing our connection to nature more dramatically than ever before” (Williams 2017:5), we do not experience being in natural environments enough to realize the profound impact that they can have on our restoration, relationships, and thinking. Without a conscious shift, our connection will not get any better.

Loorz writes that a “growing number of ‘nones’ (those without church affiliation) find nature a better church than a building and an institution” (2021:48). The message is clear and not without merit: “spirituality and nature are not separate” (6, 7). For the church to be life-giving and facilitate transformation, experiencing God is needed, not just explaining God.

While there are those who have “erred in worshiping the creation rather than the Creator, replacing God with something less” (Van Dyke, Mahan, Sheldon, and Brand 1996:11), there are those who have long acknowledged God as Creator but who have also failed to care for his creation or benefit from learning about how God designed it to function. “It is to our mutual benefit to reflect on the indissoluble connections between ourselves and the natural world” (Edwards 2001:1). How else can we fully fear or revere God the Creator and “worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water” (Rev 14:6, 7)?

As already noted, nature offers many different lessons that can be applied to church life to make them more vital and healthy. This paper introduces six principles sustained in nature that can return life and vitality into congregational life. These principles are counterintuitive because human nature keeps driving people away from nature and God. It is important to never forget that nature has remained connected to the principles of its Creator.

As an example, look at the forests: “The woods are full of life, above and below the ground” (Arvay 2018:24). In 2016, Suzanne Simard presented her life-long research in a TED talk. After describing the more technical process of scientific research on trees, she delivered the main point of her talk: “trees communicate” (n.p.). She went on to explain: “Through back-and-forth conversations, [trees] increase the resilience of the whole community. It probably reminds you of our own social communities, and our families” (n.p.). She summarized her main point as follows: “Forests aren’t simply collections of trees, they’re complex systems with hubs and networks that overlap and connect trees and allow them to communicate, and they provide avenues for feedback and adaptation, and this makes the forest resilient” (n.p.). Within the forests, there are hub trees and overlapping networks, something like tree families. Simard refers to these as “mother trees” in her book *Finding the Mother Tree*.

Now, if on the third day of Creation, God created such a beautiful, life-giving system in the plant realm—a system that strives on mutual interdependence, symbiosis, and sustainability, where older generations protect and feed younger generations and provide important information for life—how much more can these general laws help humans (created on the sixth day) to thrive? How can we apply these laws, not only to our personal lives but to church bodies and/or communities?

## Six Secrets by Which Nature Thrives

In his book *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*, Christian Schwarz identified six principles found in nature that, when applied to churches, can provide new life and vitality (1996). These principles include (1) interdependence, (2) symbiosis, (3) multiplication, (4) energy transformation, (5) fruitfulness, and (6) sustainability. Each principle will be examined in turn, as well as examples and principles in the Bible.

### Interdependence

Christoph Schalk writes, “All areas in an organism (whether it be in your body or your environment—family, friends, co-workers, etc.) are connected; this is referred to as *Interdependence*. A change in one area always has consequences for another area, sometimes immediately and sometimes after a period of time” (2020:10). In nature, there is interdependence displayed through the life of ants. Ants understand their current position (for example, “I should be harvesting and storing food now”), as well as having a perspective concerning the seasons (i.e., “The winter is coming, and we will need this food”) (28). They understand that a change in position can create change in their perspective.

Another example of interdependence is the flight patterns of geese. As they fly, they each take turns leading the formation, thereby allowing each goose to take the lead *and* to find rest at the back of the pack, in turn (7a9rian2 2013). Interdependence “directs our attention to our context, the big picture, and the interconnections between the two” (Schalk 2020:27).

Exodus 18 shares a story involving Moses and his father-in-law, Jethro. Jethro had observed all that Moses was doing and suggested that he employ a better method of delegation. Verses 25 and 26 describe how Moses took his advice. “Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves” (ESV). Moses

discovered that employing the principle of interdependence was beneficial not only for himself, but for his people.

### Symbiosis

“The word ‘symbiosis’ originates from the Greek, meaning ‘life together.’ Nature offers many examples of life forms that are fundamentally different but live together in such a way that they mutually complement and support each other” (Schalk 2020:59). The relationships between fungi and decaying matter and sea anemones and hermit crabs are just two examples of symbiosis in nature (Bird 2014).

A biblical example of symbiosis was the relationship between King Solomon and King Hiram (1 Kgs 5). King Hiram had been a long-time ally of King David. When Solomon took over the task of building the Lord’s temple, Hiram agreed to supply Solomon with building materials (vs. 1-10). In exchange, Solomon annually supplied Hiram’s court with wheat and olive oil (v. 11).

### Multiplication

The idea of multiplication involves the passing of knowledge, skills, etc., to the next generation. Schalk writes, “Endless growth would become a drain on existing structures, resulting in systemic malfunction, and ultimately, death. Knowledge and skill are best multiplied by passing them on to others as soon as possible” (2020:10). A good example of the power of multiplication in nature is found in the rabbit. Rabbits multiply their numbers easily and rapidly; a female rabbit can give birth to up to 40 babies a year.

Jesus’s final instructions to his disciples were to multiply: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19, 20a, ESV). Thus, it is not surprising that the early church in Acts (Acts 6:1a, 9:31, 12:24) was passionate about sharing the gospel with new believers who, in turn, passed it on to others. In this way, the early church grew and “multiplied” (Acts 9:31, ESV).

### Energy Transformation

“The principle of *Energy Transformation* takes energy that is already available, as well as an inner desire to move forward, and attempts to divert that energy in a constructive direction” (Schalk 2020:10). One example of energy transformation in nature is the dung beetle. This humble

insect lays its eggs in balls of elephant dung; the dung not only protects the larvae but provides food for it to eat once it hatches.

In the Bible an example of energy transformation can be found in 1 Kings 19:19, when Elijah passed his cloak (a physical symbol for his ministry as one of God’s prophets) to Elisha. “So Elijah departed and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve teams of oxen, and he was with the twelfth team. Elijah passed by him and threw his cloak around him” (ESV).

### Fruitfulness

“The principle of *Fruitfulness* inquires whether or not a process makes sense and fulfills the goal at hand” (Schalk 2020:10). We see this lived out in the process that a vintner uses to make wine; he must follow specific steps to ensure that the grapes he grows are perfect for the wine which he creates. He carefully prunes each vine, tying up bits that might begin to droop, so that the vine is able to produce optimal fruit.

Mark 11:12-14, 20-25 tells the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree that was not bearing fruit. After learning more about the vast impact of a fig tree on its surroundings in nature, I came to understand that Jesus did not choose the fig tree randomly. Fig trees are, indeed, the queen of trees (Deeble and Stone 2014); they bear fruit four times a year, and a number of plants, insects, and animals depend on the presence of a “mother fig tree.” Mother fig trees can also reproduce themselves to have daughter fig trees. Thus, Jesus demonstrated to those who took the fig tree for granted how important fruitfulness is to our Heavenly Father and how he desires that for us.

### Sustainability

“*Sustainability* ensures that over a long period of time, our entire life to be exact, we will continually bear fruit and that this fruit will continue to multiply in other people” (Schalk 2020:10). In nature this principles is illustrated in the life of the alpine dock—a plant that grows where the concentration of nitrogen is too high for other plants. Yet, the Alpine dock does not release nitrogen from the ground into the air, as do most plants. Instead, it releases it back into the ground. Thus, it fertilizes the ground for the next generation, by passing on what it has received (65).

A biblical example of sustainability is exemplified when the apostles became overwhelmed and overloaded. They did not hesitate to find seven godly men from the Greek-speaking community to handle the issue with the widows, so their ministry was not hindered (Acts 6:3-5), illustrating flexibility, wisdom, and empowerment.

## The Six Principles and Church Life

The six life principles identified by Schwarz have been briefly listed with illustrations on how these principles are exemplified in nature and where they are demonstrated in the Bible. Some may be asking, What does this have to do with the church? How can these principles enhance the spiritual wellbeing and health of my congregation? Due to the limited space in this article, I do not focus on each principle in detail but present only a few examples associated with relevant church issues.

Before going any further, it is important to remember that the application of natural laws flows from the character of the Triune God. At the creation of this earth, it was God the Creator who mastered the whole process. Christ the Word was there, providing the DNA information for all living organisms (John 1:3). The Holy Spirit was there as the breath of life (*ruiah*)—literally the Spirit who gives life (John 6:63). From the beginning, the interrelated, communal God who put in place the “interconnected systems that support life on earth” was present (Edwards 2006:59). People were created in God’s image (Gen 1:26, 27, 9:6), were made for interpersonal love “amidst of, and in relation to the rest of creation” (16), reflecting the nature of God.

Some who have been involved for many years in the North American Division congregational life, could possibly explain much better than I ever could, why loving relationships (along with holistic small groups) are the lowest-scored qualities of hundreds of Adventist churches. It seems we are good at explaining but not so good at relating—relating to God, relating to others, relating to the nature.

“The trinitarian insight that God’s very being is relational provides a basis for a vision of the fundamental reality of the universe as relational. The interrelatedness that ecologists find in the biosphere on Earth, and the interrelatedness that science discovers at all levels from quantum physics to cosmology, springs from a God whose being is to be in relationship” (Edwards 2006:121). We are, “from prenatal existence, created in relationship” (151), so relationships are not really a matter of our deliberate choice and yet we often prefer living disconnected in a dim light of religion affected by our sinful rebellious nature. By God’s design, we are influenced by internal and external relations, and our interdependence with others is the basis of our physical and emotional life (151). Looz writes, “*Relationship* is actually a more accurate way to describe the core operating action of reality” (2021:113), and the nature around us is God’s witness.

Many flowering plants produce nectar, which serve as a food for insects and other animals. As bees drink nectar from a flower, they are dusted with tiny grains of pollen and carry these to other flowers of the same



kind. Flowering plants and trees depend on this pollination to reproduce. Bees, plants, animals, and humans all benefit from this relationship and cooperation.

In the depths of the oceans, there are more alliances between different kinds of creatures—some, very unexpected. Groups of large fish gather in areas where smaller fish assist them by removing dead skin and parasites. Under other circumstances, the larger fish might eat the smaller ones; however, at these cleaning stations, the large fish allow themselves to be cleaned.

Most fish avoid the stinging tentacles of the sea anemone; however, the clown fish makes a home among them. A special coating on the clown fish's skin protects it from being stung. In this way, the clown fish is safe from predators. In return, the clown fish shares food with the anemone and provides protection against anemone-eating fish (Solmioneula 2012).

These types of examples of interconnections are all around us when we look closely at the natural world. How do these “instinctively wise” creatures know when and if to form partnerships with others so different from themselves? They follow the laws/information that the Creator himself placed within their DNA, again illustrating that the natural world is about relationships. What are the lessons from this for practical theology? The revitalization of churches depends in many ways on discovering connections and developing relationships. Just as life in the natural world is not merely a random collection of individual creatures but rather a marvelously orchestrated masterpiece, so the church cannot prosper and be alive in silos and/or without organic mentality. A beautiful example of that is Paul's elaboration on church as Christ's body in 1 Corinthians 12.

God's people cannot ignore the gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed on each believer—including women and youth or children, because if they are not intentionally involved in ministry and their ideas not taken seriously, the consequences are similar as when “forests are clear-cut, heavy rainfall washes the exposed soil into the nearest stream. Salmon cannot survive in sediment-filled streams and the waterways become devoid of life. Now—the grizzly bears can no longer find salmon to feast on in the fall, salmon they need so they can lay on a thick layer of fat to survive their deep winter sleep” (Wohlleben 2021:204).

When the gifts of each member of a system are not recognized, the whole system—from insects to small rodents to bald eagles—falls apart. How then can the church stay healthy and strive for the future if it does not do the same?

In the example mentioned earlier, it was pointed out that scientists have recently discovered trees communicating or sending messages to each other. If trees care about each other, how about us? What can we

learn from the mother tree “teaching” or “mentoring” daughter trees? The lesson about necessity of intergenerational mentoring to stay alive is obvious. “Trees communicate through their interconnected root systems” (Wohlleben 2021:43), but “they can’t talk to each other without help” (*National Geographic* 2018). They live in symbiotic relationship with fungi, or mushrooms who “can interlink practically all trees and other plants in the forest. They turn entire wooded areas into interconnected, highly complex habitats” (Arvay 2018:24). What are the implications for church life?

To succeed in mentoring the next generation, older Christians must communicate with younger Christians to help them grow spiritually and hopefully help them remain as active members. To do this most congregations need help. Members living in silos cannot succeed without symbiotic relationships, without interdependence, energy transformation, multiplication, etc.; therefore, a magic formula would help in solving the issue of those leaving the church but there isn’t one. However, I can say with certainty that there is a way to connect and help bond older members with the younger generations. God provides a way to mentor and involve our daughters and sons in the mission of his kingdom through examples in nature. The question is, Are we willing to seek and respond to the lessons learned from nature?

When thinking about the revitalization of mission and/or evangelism in the Adventist Church, the following example from nature comes to mind. Have you heard about the unusual forest growing in southwest England? It is the life’s work of Martin Crawford, an unconventional gardener who grows 500 edible plants with minimal time spent in maintenance.

What we think of as normal in terms of fruit production is actually not normal at all. Annual plants are very rare in nature, and yet, most of our agriculture or our fields are full of annual plants. It’s not normal. What’s normal is a more forested or semi forested system. Forest gardens in a tempered climate tend to have seven layers or so:—high trees, smaller trees, shrubs, perennials, ground cover layers, root crops and climbers. So, it includes directly used plants . . . [and] there are also plants of indirect use, system plants to help the system function better. (*National Geographic* 2019)

What are the implications of this example for developing sustainable and fruitful evangelism in our fields? How often do we see a focus only on “annual plants” in our ministry? To what degree is there a tendency to get rid of ministries that have only indirect impact on the production so we can preach the Three Angels’ Messages God called the Adventist Church to do?

When considering the damage COVID-19 has caused among many local congregations with the decline in giving and weekly attendance, the COVID-related conflicts over masking, long-term sicknesses, and lost lives, it is important to learn from and find inspiration from trees.

Think of a sprouting willow tree after a clear-cutting. The tree defies its destiny, revitalizes itself even after a radical interference in life, and attempts a new beginning. It grows above and beyond the harm done. Those who are in a similar situation, wanting to leave old wounds behind and to feel revitalized, might find solidarity with this unfaltering willow that rose again and feel inspired to find new energy. (Arvay 2018:81)

This is a beautiful example of energy transformation and symbiosis. As can be seen, even such natural principles do not function in isolation.

Even when trees are dying, there is something to be learned, particularly in view of the increasing number of churches that are closing their doors and running out of life. If you consider this thought an exaggeration, note the aging of membership in North America. A recent study of demographics in the North American Division conducted by the Center for Creative Ministry has pointed out that as “the older portion of the Adventist population has increased,” the median age of church members between 2008 and 2018 shifted from 51 to 61 (Sahlin, Richardson, and Činčala 2018).

Perhaps there is even a purpose in dying churches. Think for a minute about old, dead trees lying on the ground completely rotted on the inside and hollow like stovepipes. “They invite the fungi in and offer them their wood as food. . . . Fungi that enter via a wound in the tree convert the wood into a sort of humus as they eat their way through the tree, creating debris that is soft, crumbly, and moist. Now the tree can grow inner roots into this ‘soil’ and reabsorb nutrients it stored in earlier years in its growing rings” (Wohlleben 2021:204).

Does it make a difference how a church dies? Yes, it does. As a student, I ran into a book called *Death of the Church* by Mark Regele (1995); the subtitle of the book caught my attention immediately. “The Church has a choice: to die as a result of its resistance to change or to die in order to live.”

If the church resists dying for too long, it may get a cancer and end up killing its mission. “Every cell of life must die in order for the whole being to continue to live. Cancer is a cell that refuses to die. It therefore kills the whole system” (Loorz 2021:152). I hope these thoughts and analogies from nature provide an alarming stimulus to (re)think how we run churches.

## Conclusion

Nature, both as described in the Scriptures and that which is all around us, is a touchstone—a means to connect with God and his wisdom. As humans, we have a spiritual yearning which seems to be encoded in our DNA, that is often “fulfilled through contact with [God in] nature” (Lionberger 2007:30). “God appeared to many people, and those appearances were almost always in the wilderness” (31).

I am not sure about you, but it never fully occurred to me until recently how important it is to be intentional about spending time in nature and learning from nature. As Matthew Sleeth says, God speaks to us “through our everyday interactions with his creation” (2019:21). Unless we make a conscious shift in our personal (and church) lives to connect more intentionally and systematically with nature and God, our mission and practical theology in the coming days and years may run out of gas, becoming flat and dry.

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