

**Learning from “the Wisdom of the Creator”
to Restore Our Communities and Churches**
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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 dwell in community. For example, during the summer of 2020, my family and I became a part of a backyard fellowship. I fell in love with the community aspect of this group of believers and was looking forward to being part of a new church plant when churches were permitted to meet again. With this group, my family enjoyed multigenerational worship and preaching in nature (always followed by meals and social time together) . . . until cold weather arrived, and the “nature church” became a house church. After a few meetings, my wife asked that we stop meeting at the house church inside. While I did not fully understand her decision, I complied.

During the summer of 2021, during our regular visit to our native country (the Czech Republic), my 10-years-old son spent several nights with a friend, allowing my wife and I to get time alone together. I did not have any mission meetings or activities scheduled and had promised to spend the weekend with her—just the two of us. I assumed we’d go to my wife’s home church in Prague for Sabbath worship. However, when Saturday morning arrived, my wife asked me to spend the day with her at one of the largest and most beautiful botanical gardens in Europe, instead. Although surprised at first, I eventually agreed, seeing how much it meant to her. It was a wonderful sunny day, during which we walked through the garden, chatted, observed and listened to nature, or just sat, reading on our own or together. At one point, my wife even asked me to preach to her, which I gladly did. Although I had initially felt burdened by

breaking away from our usual habit of attending church on a Sabbath morning—in the midst of the “concrete jungle”—I am so glad that I agreed to spend the day in the way we did.

For some time, I have longed to write an article about the ways in which nature can help develop church community and life in a healthier way. It was after our trip to the Czech that I bought fresh new books written during COVID, dealing with nature, spirituality, and church life in nature. To my amazement I realized that my wife—intuitively—was onto something much bigger than I thought. I have appreciated nature since my childhood, observing my dad (a pastor) grow garden, walking to school in a rural place, watching the beautiful night sky fill with stars, taking care of our little garden in the backyard where we grow tomatoes, peppers, carrots, herbs, etc. *But* I never fully realized how important these activities were, not just for my physical, emotional, or spiritual health, but also for gaining a better understanding of God the Creator and relating to the teachings in the Bible.

In the last couple months, I have watched multiple videos and read my newly-acquired books, written by authors of various backgrounds—scientists, pastors, foresters, nature activists, etc. Often, while I could not always identify with the authors’ worldview assumptions, I learned that each of them has valuable points worth hearing. These helped me connect a few dots in my understanding of God, spirituality, and church life.

In this article, I do not necessarily want to promote ecological activism within our church, although it would not be so 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 I have run into some exciting scientific findings in this area. Finally, I do not want to push forth a “nature religion” that cultivates “feelings of belonging and connection to the

earth” (Taylor, 2009, p. 5), as it is often this thinking that causes people to fall into the trap of Paganism, Animism, and/or Pantheism.

In the following pages, I want to present arguments to sensitize us to what God wants to teach us 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 continue to learn from nature in light of current science (if it does not contradict with the biblical truths, of course). It is my understanding, however, that even if there was no science and we had access to the Creator’s wisdom revealed in nature only through the pages of Scripture, there are plenty of nature topics that deserve attention such as theology of “wilderness,” trees, plants, animals, or human heart, etc. (I will leave that task to the 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 we dive into the realm of nature through the lenses of scientific discoveries (medical, psychological, biological, neuroscientific, etc.), there are many biblical texts that begin to make more sense: Job’s dispute with God, David’s nature-focused poems (found in the book of Psalms), Jesus’s teaching about kingdom, and so on.

My thinking, since my studies at Andrews University, has been influenced and shaped by the Natural Church Development philosophy. From those days I became convinced that to be able to apply the Bible well and grow a healthy church, we need to implement a multi-disciplinary approach to the Bible—more than theological analysis, research, or science could provide. Along with Scripture, nature provides us with a “text” for learning about God, His will, His ways. This text is relevant for us, today, as we seek to grow healthy, wholesome churches.

Connection with nature has become increasingly difficult. Unfortunately, as civilization and technology progress, the gap between mankind and nature widens. Loorz (2021) 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” (p. 151). Despite our holistic, biblical understanding, many of us tend to hold “old view of nature as a big machine, a soulless system” (Wohlleben, 2021, p. 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, p. 3). “Regular—or any—experience of wilderness is missing from most of our modern lives” (Haupt, 2021, p. 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, p. 4). Research shows that people in such conditions even “avoid nearby nature because a chronic disconnection from nature causes them to underestimate its . . . benefits” (Williams, 2017, p. 3). Even agnostic writer Wohlleben (2021) admits that “the artificial world of the city offers all kinds of stimuli for which we were not originally designed” (p. 156).

Our individualistic cultural values only add to the problem at hand. The ever-popular concept of individualism as a basis for achieving “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, p. 9). Because we are “losing our connection to nature more dramatically than ever before” (Williams, 2017, p. 5),

we do not experience natural environments enough to realize the profound impact that they can have on our restoration, relating, and thinking. Without a conscious shift, our connection will not get better.

Loorz (2021) writes that a “growing number of ‘nones’ (those without church affiliation) find nature a better church than a building and an institution” (p. 48). The message is clear and not without merit: “spirituality and nature are not separate” (Loorz, 2021, p. 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” (Dyke, Mahan, Sheldon, Brand, 1996, p. 11), there are those who have long acknowledged God as Creator but have failed to care for His creation or benefit from learning about how God made it function. “It is to our mutual benefit to reflect on the indissoluble connections between ourselves and the natural world” (Edwards, 2001, p. 1).

As already stated, nature offers many different lessons that can be applied to our churches to make them more vital and healthy. In this presentation, we present six principles sustained in nature; the same principles can bring back life and vitality into our congregations. These principles are counterintuitive because our human nature drives us away from nature and God. However, nature has remained connected to the principles of its Creator.

As an example, look at woods: “The woods are full of life, above and below the ground” (Arvay, 2018, p. 24). In 2016, Suzanne Simard presented her life-long research in a TED talk. After describing the more technical process of scientific research of 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” (Simard, 2016, 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” (Simard, 2016, n.p.). Within the forests, there are hub trees and overlapping networks, something like tree families.¹

Now, if on the fourth 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) thrive? Additionally, 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* (1996), Christian Schwarz identified six principles found in nature that, when applied to our churches, can provide new life and vitality to our church. These principles include (1) interdependence, (2) symbiosis, (3) multiplication, (4) energy transformation, (5) fruitfulness, and (6) sustainability. We will examine each principle in turn, as well as connect it to examples of the principle in the Bible.

Interdependence

Christoph Schalk (2020) 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. (p. 10)

¹ Author Suzanne Simard (2021) refers to these as “mother trees” in her book *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (Alfred A. Knopf).

In nature, we see 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 have perspective (i.e., “The winter is coming, and we will need this food”) (Schalk, 2020). 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 in the front position, 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, p. 27)

In Exodus 18, we find a story involving Moses and his father-in-law, Jethro. In this story, Jethro observes all that Moses is doing and suggests that he employ a better method of delegation. In Exodus 18:25–26, we read that Moses took Jethro’s 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 p. 59). The relationships between fungi and decaying matter (Schalk, 2020) and sea anemones and hermit crabs (Bird, 2014) are just two examples of symbiosis in nature.

A biblical example of symbiosis was the relationship between King Solomon and King Hiram (1 Kings 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 (1 Kings 5:1-10). In exchange, Solomon annually supplied Hiram's court with wheat and olive oil (1 Kings 5:11).

Multiplication

The idea of multiplication involves the passing of knowledge, skills, etc. to the next generation. Schalk (2020) 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" (p. 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 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 p. 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.

Biblically, we see an example of energy transformation in 1 Kings 19:19, when Elijah passed his cloak (a physical symbol for his ministry as one of God’s prophets) to Elisha. We read: “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 p. 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.

In Mark 11:12–14, 20–25, we find 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 surrounding nature, I came to understand Jesus did not choose the fig tree randomly. Fig trees are, indeed, the queen of trees; they bear fruit four times a year, and a number of plants, insects, and animals depend on the presence of “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 p. 10). In nature, we see sustainability 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 the 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; it provides by passing on what it has received. (Schalk, 2020, p. 65)

We see this principle biblically exemplified when the apostles became overwhelmed and overloaded; they did not hesitate to instate seven deacons so the ministry was not hindered (Acts 6:3–5). This is truly an example of flexibility, wisdom, and empowerment!

The Six Principles and Church Life

We have examined each of the six life principles identified by Schwarz (1996), how these principles are exemplified in nature, and where we see them demonstrated in the Bible. Now you 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, we will not go into great details but instead, I will present a few examples.

Before we go any further into applying the six principles to church life, it is important to remember that the application of each principle flows from the character of 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 the living organisms (John 1:3). The Holy Spirit was there as the breath of life (*rúah*); he was literally the Spirit who gives life (John 6:63). From the beginning, we glimpse the interrelated, communal God who put in place the “interconnected systems that support life on earth” (Edwards, 2006, p. 59). We were created in God’s image (Gen. 1:26, 27; 9:6). We were made for interpersonal love “amidst of, and in relation to the rest of creation” (Edwards, 2006, p. 16), reflecting the interrelated nature of God.

Some of you have been involved for many years in NAD congregational life and could possibly explain much better than I ever could why loving relationships (along with holistic

small groups) are the lowest-scored qualities 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, p. 121)

We are, “from prenatal existence, created in relationship” (Edwards, 2001, p. 151), so relationships are not really a matter of our deliberate choice. We are influenced by internal and external relations, and our interdependence with others is the basis of our physical and emotional life (Edwards, 2001, p. 151). Looorz (2021) writes, “*Relationship* is actually a more accurate way to describe the core operating action of reality” (p. 113).

Many flowering plants produce nectar, which serves 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, we find 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 from their skin. Under other circumstances, the larger fish might eat the smaller ones. But 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 them from being stung. In this way, the clown fish is safe from predators. In return, the clown fish shares food with the anemone and provide protection against anemone-eating fish (Solmioneula, 2012).

We can see such examples of interconnections all around us when we look closely at the natural world. How do these “instinctively wise” creatures know to form partnerships with others

so different from themselves? They follow the laws/information that the Creator Himself placed within the DNA of each. The natural world is about relationships. What can we learn from this for practical theology? Revitalization of churches lies in many aspects in 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.

We cannot ignore the gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed on each believer—including women and youth, because if they are not intentionally involved in ministry and their ideas not taken seriously, it is like 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, p. 204)

When the gifts of each member of the 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, we learned that scientists have recently discovered trees communicating or sending messages to each other. If trees care about each other, should we not? What can we learn from the mother tree “teaching” or “mentoring” the daughter trees? The lesson about necessity of intergenerational mentoring to stay alive is obvious. “Trees communicate through their interconnected root systems” (Wohlleben, 2021, p. 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, p. 24).

To succeed in mentoring the next generation, we must communicate with them and help them spiritually strive (and hopefully retain them in our churches); to do so, we need help. We can't succeed without symbiotic relationships, without interdependence, energy transformation, multiplication, etc. I wish I could share here a magic formula that brings the solution to the issue of those leaving the church; however, I can say with certainty that there is a way to connect and bond with the new generation. God will provide a way to mentor and involve our daughters and sons in the mission of His kingdom.

When thinking about the revitalization of mission and/or evangelism in our 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. Crawford says:

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 field 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 can we learn from this example about developing a 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?

When we consider the “damage” COVID-19 has caused to many local congregations (the financial cut, the dropped attendance, the COVID related conflicts, etc.), we can learn and find inspiration back 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, p. 81)

Even when trees are dying, there is something we can learn, particularly in view of the increasing number of churches that are closing their doors—running out of life. Imagine old trees lying over 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, p. 204)

Does it not make a difference how the church dies? As a student, I ran into a book called *Death of the Church* by Mark Regele (1995); the subtitle of the book caught immediately my attention. “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 to die for too long, it may get a cancer and end up losing. “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, p. 152). I hope these thoughts and analogies from nature provide stimulus to (re)think.

Conclusion

Nature (both as described in the Scripture and that which is all around us) is a touchstone—a means to connection 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, p. 30). “God appeared to many people, and those appearances were almost always in the wilderness” (Lionberger, 2007, p. 31).

I don’t know about you, but it had never fully occurred to me until recently how important it is to be intentional about spending time in nature and learning from nature. As

Sleeth says, God speaks to us “through our everyday interactions with his creation” (Sleeth, 2019, p. 21). Unless we make a conscious shift in our personal (and church) lives to connect more intentionally and systematically with nature and God through nature, our practical theology in the coming days and years may run out of gas, becoming flat and dry.

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