

PART THREE - SESSION EIGHT

A Better World is Possible: Communities Organizing for Change

The Rev. Robert Jemonde Taylor

At the conclusion of this session, participants will:

- Connect the biblical themes of resurrection, power, and prayer to the work of environmental justice.
- Learn to positively impact the congregation's surrounding community with a lens focused on environmental justice.
- Receive tools to help the congregation move from environmentalism to environmental justice.

Please review the primary resources, guiding Scripture, and reflection and discussion questions prior to the small group gathering. Optional resources are available for a deeper dive.

PRE-GATHERING PREPARATION

Find these resources online at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/creation-care/love-god-love-gods-world-curriculum/session-eight/>.

Primary Resources:

- Film: "Building Community around Raleigh's Walnut Creek Wetlands" from Partners for Environmental Justice North Carolina (8 minutes)
- Film: "Remembering Kearneytown" from Pavithra Vasudevan and William A. Kearney (15 min)

Optional Resources:

- "Wading Deep Podcast" - This podcast series from Saint Ambrose Episcopal Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, highlights the impact of environmental racism, economic disenfranchisement, and the resilience and resurrection of a community.

GUIDING SCRIPTURE

Mark 16:15, 20 (NRSV)

And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation." And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it."

SMALL GROUP GATHERING

Facilitator or volunteer can use the prayer below to open your time together.

OPENING PRAYER

By the Rev. Jemonde Taylor

Influenced by the Easter Chant of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

God of power and life: heaven rejoices, earth exults,
The mountains, hills, and trees of the wilderness shout for joy in your glory;
Give us the power of the Holy Spirit to be agents of resurrection,
Transforming human life and planet Earth;
Through Jesus Christ our Savior, who rose from the dead
So that the entire creation might have life, and have it more abundantly.
Amen.

CHECK-IN

Facilitator leads the group through brief check-ins from each participant.

REFLECTION

Group can choose to read the reflection out loud together or go directly to discussion questions depending on timing and how many participants were able to do the reading prior to the gathering.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is central to Christianity. Resurrection is transformation. Resurrection is about transforming creation and nature as well as human lives. Saint Ambrose Episcopal Church, Raleigh, North Carolina, has a history of being a community of resurrectors: individuals empowered to transform unjust structures and systems.

Saint Ambrose formed in 1868, shortly after the Civil War, as a church for recently emancipated Black people. The church began in Smokey Hollow, an area where free Black people lived during enslavement. Noxious smoke from the nearby railway depot floated to the low-lying community, giving the community its name. The congregation remained in Smokey Hollow until 1900 when racial, government, and economic pressures forced the church from its property. Church leaders physically moved the church by placing it on logs and rolling it one mile south across two racial color lines to a newly designated Black community. Saint Ambrose remained at that second location until the 1960s, when the church chose to relocate again. In 1956, during segregation, Raleigh created a new development for Black residents named Rochester Heights, adjacent to Walnut Creek and nearby wetlands. The city discharged raw sewage for 70 years into the wetland. The area also served as an unofficial garbage dump site. In addition to this exposure to pollutants, residents experienced home flooding that persists to this day, leading to adverse effects on their homes and health.

Jesus told his disciples before his ascension in Luke 24:49 that they would be “clothed with power from on high.” Christians receive the power of the Holy Spirit at their baptism. The word “power” means capacity to do and act. Often Christians have shied away from speaking about or praying for power because the act sounds egotistical, or because some people’s experiences of power tend to be negative, associating it with unilateral or oppressive power. There is relational power, which is power built among people through positive relationships. Saint Ambrose’s members have embraced this teaching and moved past the negative connotation of power, placing it in the context of relational power among people to do, act, and effect change.

The church founded an environmental nonprofit (which came to be called Partners for Environmental Justice, or PEJ) in the 1990s to help resurrect the ravaged wetland and combat the ways this pollution was hurting Black residents. Volunteers manually pulled mattresses, autoclave medical sterilization devices, refrigerators, thousands of tires, trash and debris from Walnut Creek and the wetland. The 2009 ribbon-cutting ceremony for a multimillion-dollar education center across Walnut Creek from Saint Ambrose

ushered in an era for environmental awareness in Raleigh. In 2014, PEJ, Saint Ambrose, and the community supported a \$1 million city bond that helped categorize the Walnut Creek Wetland from a 5-acre center to a 58-acre park.

Saint Ambrose helped found a new, countywide community organizing effort named ONE Wake, composed of 43 religious and nonprofit institutions affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation in the fall of 2020. PEJ and ONE Wake worked to pressure elected officials and the developer to require advanced stormwater designs that aid in keeping rainwater onsite of the 150-acre development only 3,000 feet upstream from the church's flood-prone community. Keeping this rainwater onsite mitigates flooding while helping prevent polluted water from entering the creek.

Saint Ambrose launched the Healing Pod in 2021, a three-phase initiative: podcast; labyrinth; and therapeutic horticulture gardens to address the community's mental and emotional health. In April 2023, the Environmental Protection Agency designated the Walnut Creek Wetland Park as its 21st Urban Waters Partner location.

The resurrection is often understood as a past event or something that a select group of people can look forward to in the distant future. Few Christians see resurrection as something that should impinge upon the present moment. Mark records the compelling story of Christ's resurrection and his imperative to the disciples, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). The Greek word for creation is the English word "cosmos," which encompasses the entire universe. Through Christ's resurrection, the Good News of restoration is not only something meant for all nations, but the entire cosmos. The resurrection of Christ permeates every aspect of our personal, public, and cosmic reality. Prayer is essential to do this work. An example of this is Saint Ambrose's Litany for the Wetland (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/109ofl7fundNbpF5Gi1NNZ5wgpUN6R76r/view>). In its environmental justice organizing and its promotion of mental and physical health in the community, Saint Ambrose presents a powerful witness to the reality of resurrection in the world.

Discussion Questions

Facilitator guides the group through the discussion questions.

1. Are there examples of environmental resurrection in your congregation's or surrounding community's past? What environmentally needs resurrecting in your congregation or community today?
2. Jesus told his disciples before his ascension in Luke 24:49 that they would be "clothed with power from on high." What are the local environmental needs in your community? How do you see your church becoming a power congregation by working to effect change in the environment (creation)? Are there local environmental groups that the congregation can partner with to move this effort forward? Research to find local community organizing efforts (i.e. Industrial Areas Foundation, Gamaliel Foundation, etc.)
3. Trees have been and continue to be important in the African and Black American Christian worship and spiritual lives. Some enslaved Black Americans in the 1800s met to worship God under a canopy of trees commonly called brush arbors or hush harbors. The faithful practiced Christianity in this holy and hidden manner. Today in Ethiopia, some Orthodox Christians worship God within "church forests." One church or monastery sits in the center of a forest ranging from 5 acres to 1,000 acres. The clergy and laity believe the tree canopy shading them "prevents prayers from being lost to the sky." Some of these churches are more than 1,500 years old. How might your worshipping community be more intentional about praying for God's creation? Does your community specifically pray for the environment during the context of worship? Consider having your church

leadership write a collect or litany concerning a local environmental effort to use in the context of worship over a period of time. (i.e., [Litany for the Wetland](#))

4. Throughout its history Saint Ambrose and its community experienced many examples of environmental racism. Has your community experienced environmental racism or do you observe it in other local communities? Do you see environmental injustice locally in historically under-resourced or underserved communities? Do you see these differences break along economic lines? Has your church caused harm by participating in environmental injustice against nature or people? How can your congregation partner more intentionally with those local communities to effect environmental change?

CLOSING CHECK-OUT & PRAYER

What word describes how you feel right now? After you've shared, please invite another person to go.

After all have offered a word, the facilitator or volunteer can pray a simple prayer bringing together the hopes and prayers of the whole group.

ACTION OPPORTUNITIES

These are activities and engagement opportunities to explore different ways to get involved and learn more.

- Read: [Moving From Creation Care to Embrace Environmental Justice](#) (<https://faithandleadership.com/moving-beyond-creation-care-address-environmental-justice>)
- Conduct a home and church energy audit. Some electric companies provide energy audits or green audits to customers.
- Check with local, county, or state agencies for environmental stewardship programs that benefit nonprofits (i.e., [Rainwater Rewards Cost Share Program](#), <https://raleighnc.gov/stormwater/services/apply-raleigh-rainwater-rewards/raleigh-rainwater-rewards-subsidy-program>).
- Contact and meet with elected officials at the local, state, and national levels to express your congregation's concern and response to environmentalism and sustainability.
- Work with The Episcopal Church's Office of Government Relations in the [creation care policy area](#) (<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/office-government-relations/about-us/>).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Since 2012, the **Rev. Robert Jemonde Taylor** has served as the 11th rector of the historically African American Saint



Ambrose Episcopal Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. The church is in the Walnut Creek Wetland floodplain, where Raleigh released raw sewage for 70 years and then zoned the area as a community for Black residents. The church responded by helping found an environmental nonprofit, Partners for Environmental Justice, and partnering with Raleigh to create a \$2 million environmental educational center and the Walnut Creek Wetland Park. Taylor holds a Bachelor of Science in mechanical engineering from North Carolina State University and a Master of Science in mechanical engineering with a concentration in robotics and vehicle design from Stanford University. He worked for Michelin Tire Company for three years before entering seminary and earning his Master of Divinity from General Theological Seminary. Learn more at his website (<https://www.jemonde.com/>).