

Upwelling

Connections and Reflections from The BTS Center

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Welcome to the Autumn 2023 issue of *Upwelling*, The BTS Center's occasional print newsletter. We are delighted to connect with you in this way, and we hope that when you are finished reading, you might pass your copy along to someone else who might be interested.

The EcoPreacher Cohort: An Experiment in the Imaginative Possibilities of Preaching

Building on our legacy from the former Bangor Theological Seminary, The BTS Center is committed to our mission to help equip spiritual leaders and congregations for their most important work. One of our robust, longer-term projects in the past several years has been the development of the EcoPreacher Cohort, a year-long, monthly gathering of leaders seeking to integrate ecological themes and the impacts of climate change into their preaching.

The EcoPreacher Cohort grew out of a connection between The BTS Center and Rev. Dr. Leah Schade, Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship at Lexington Theological Seminary and author of several books on preaching and climate. Having collaborated with Rabbi Yonatan Neril of the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development to create the EcoPreacher 1-2-3 resource, Rev. Dr. Schade was eager to work with The BTS Center to broaden the reach of this work. Beginning with a workshop in the spring of 2022, this work evolved into the year-long cohort that concluded last month, in partnership with Creation Justice Ministries, with CJM Co-Executive Director Avery Davis Lamb joining Rev. Nicole Diroff, Program Director at The BTS Center, as co-facilitator. We are excited as we plan for deeper and more extensive development of the program in the months and years to come.

Rev. Dr. Schade is a tireless advocate for guiding preachers as they seek to address the most critical issues of our times. As she notes:

Preaching builds bridges between the biblical text and the contexts of those who listen to sermons. And with the climate and environmental crises being the most urgent existential issues of our time, it's imperative that preachers draw on Scripture, theology, and ethics to inspire congregations to respond.

Though the EcoPreacher Cohort started as an experiment, it quickly became apparent how great the desire for such a program was, as the number of participants for the first year-long cohort far exceeded the expected enrollment. Rev. Nicole Diroff notes



Bobbie Hine and Baird Linke, two participants in the EcoPreacher Cohort, who met during their shared Kinship Circle, got together in person to enjoy a hike in the woods.

that the intention from the beginning was to learn with and from the participants to address the needs and desires of preachers most effectively. "From the beginning, we wanted to incorporate research into the project," Nicole says, "and we have been gifted with an expanded research team from Leah to Dr. Rebecca Kneale Gould (who came on as our Scholar In Residence) and now Dr. Marquisha Scott."

The research emerging from the EcoPreacher Cohort has been enlightening and, at times, surprising. As Ben Yosua-Davis, Director of Applied Research at The BTS Center, who is working closely on this project, shares:

We asked both Eco-Preacher participants and leaders from their congregations about why they thought members of their church might be resistant to hearing sermons focused on climate or care of the Earth. Pastors shared that the primary barrier was conflict. Congregants gave an entirely different message: they either felt too old or lacked the energy.

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*Rev. Dr. Leah Schade of
Lexington Theological Seminary*



*Avery Davis Lamb of
Creation Justice Ministries*

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Knowing the unique circumstances and perceptions of both preachers and their congregants has allowed The BTS Center and Creation Justice Ministries, as well as a host of guests and collaborators, to create a program uniquely attuned to this moment in our climate-changed world. That knowledge has also formed a basis for offering a space for community for these preachers, who often carry a host of worries and stresses with them as they make time to engage in this space. As Rev. Dr. Schade shares:

We saw a consistent theme throughout the year, of pastors wrestling with eco-grief, feelings of being overwhelmed, and frustration in motivating their congregations not just to take climate change seriously, but to take action accordingly. So three things were beneficial for this EcoPreacher Cohort: the inspirational speakers who gave them tools and resources for sustaining their energy for this work, the Kinship Circles who met with each other to give support and encouragement, and the exercises that helped them improve their preaching skills. Our leadership team was gratified to hear from the participants how much they looked forward to the monthly online meetings and what it meant for them to have this group accompany them in their EcoPreaching this year.

Nicole Diroff echoes this emphasis on the importance of community: "We set up the program so that people would meet with consistent Kinship Circles (small groups)... I know that many have built significant relationships with some of the people they're consistently able to talk with during our monthly sessions."

This sentiment is echoed by co-facilitator Avery Davis Lamb, who says, "I learned that community and collaboration are absolutely essential in the work of EcoPreaching. We went in thinking that we were shaping tools and approaches to preaching about climate change. And while we did that, the space we created for preachers to encounter, learn from, and love each other was the most important part of the cohort."

As the first year-long cohort of the EcoPreacher program concludes, The BTS Center and our partners have been hard at work preparing for the next stages of this offering. Rev. Dr. Leah Schade envisions "an ecosystem of experiences, resources, and research that supports the goal of preparing preachers to proclaim the gospel compellingly in a climate-changed world." She continues: "This is a thoroughly ecumenical endeavor with the potential to impact many denominations and communions, including historically underrepresented or marginalized communities."

Recognizing the strong need for formation and community around preaching and climate change, The BTS Center and its partners are pursuing opportunities for grant funding to expand the scope and potential of the EcoPreacher Cohort. Coupled with a robust research initiative to help shape and drive the program forward, additional funding would expand and enrich an already thriving program. Through this program and others, The BTS Center remains committed to fostering a space of learning and connection for preachers who recognize the deep importance of engaging their communities in climate-focused conversations.

"The climate crisis is the primary characteristic of the world in which we are living today and the primary characteristic of the world in which spiritual leaders are leading," notes Rev. Dr. Allen Ewing-Merrill, Executive Director of The BTS Center. "Every preacher ought to be asking, 'In a climate-changed world, what does it mean to carry the sacred responsibility to preach, and what is this moment asking of me?'" He adds, "As an organization building on the legacy of the former Bangor Theological Seminary, our roots are two hundred years deep, and we take seriously our role in leadership formation — in offering spiritual and vocational formation experiences that are oriented to the greatest challenges of our day."

Ben Yosua-Davis expresses a similar sentiment: "I also want to say this: Climate is not another cause. Climate is our lived reality. It's our weather. It's the shape of our children's and grandchildren's lives. Furthermore, the climate crisis is fundamentally a spiritual crisis. Underneath this planetary emergency lie a series of cultural and spiritual forces that keep driving us towards destruction." He continues, "And because of that, there are hardly any groups better equipped to engage with this moment than preachers are. I don't want to be so crass as to promise that engaging with climate will lead churches to institutional renewal. But I do believe that whenever we choose to engage with our climate-changed world out of the best of who we are as God's people, then Spirit will meet us powerfully there. Every. Single. Time."

As the leaders and participants of the EcoPreacher Cohort envision the future of this vital offering, Avery Davis Lamb offers this encapsulation of some of the hopes for the program:

We hope that through the program preachers will expand their view of what EcoPreaching looks like. Perhaps that means preaching on other related justice issues. Perhaps it means preaching every week with a "Green" lens to the Bible. Perhaps it means shutting up and letting the trees growing outside the church windows preach! Whatever it is for a preacher's context, we want to expand the vision of how we might preach well in a climate-changed world.

We look forward to seeing what new insights, learnings, and connections come from the next EcoPreacher Cohort — and we hope that many of you will be interested in joining us on this journey!

"I am deeply grateful to The BTS Center for bringing us together for this year-long journey. The theological conversations and resources were rich and expanded my thinking about our kinship with the rest of God's creation."

— Alison Patton, First Congregational Church, South Portland, Maine

New EcoPreacher Cohort Starting in September 2024 in Collaboration with Creation Justice Ministries and Lexington Theological Seminary

We celebrate the completion of our first year-long EcoPreacher Cohort. With great anticipation, we look forward to a new cohort starting in September 2024, made possible through a deepening collaboration with our partners: Creation Justice Ministries and Lexington Theological Seminary.

Through congregational and preacher surveys, focus groups, and interviews, we have learned a great deal about this program's effectiveness and its impacts in congregational settings. In the year ahead, we are eager to accompany another cohort of preachers as they seek to take risks in exploring ecological and eco-justice

themes in their preaching in a safe, mutually supportive, non-judgmental space.

In addition, we intend to offer workshops and webinars during the upcoming winter and spring — opportunities to explore best practices and creative possibilities for compelling preaching in a climate-changed world. Watch www.thebtscenter.org for dates, details, and take a moment to fill out an interest form if the EcoPreacher Cohort sounds like an exciting opportunity for your spiritual and vocational formation.

Celebrating Convocation 2023

Kinship: Re-Weaving the Great Web of Belonging

In late September, as the leaves were beginning to turn and the chill of autumn was entering the air here in Maine, The BTS Center hosted our first in-person Convocation in several years.

Nearly a hundred of you joined us at Maple Hill Farm Inn and Conference Center in Hallowell, Maine, for two days of talks, creative and contemplative immersion sessions, circle conversations, deep connections, and laughter — with special keynote speakers Victoria Loorz and John Bear Mitchell. In addition, another eighty members of our community from many different states joined us for our Online Companions Track.

We are still in awe of the joy of being with all of you and the beautiful, thoughtful contributions you brought. These photos represent a few highlights of our time together. We can't wait to see you at Convocation 2024! Watch for dates and details coming soon!



CLIMATE CHANGED



Co-hosted by Nicole Diroff and Ben Yosua-Davis, with producer Peterson Toscano, Season 2 of The BTS Center's podcast, *Climate Changed*, focuses on collective honesty and complicated hope in a climate-changed world. Guests include Rob Shetterly, Susi Moser, Eileen Flanagan, Keisha McKenzie, Ray Buckley, Margaret Wheatley, Debra Rienstra, and Shanon Shah. We are off and running with Season 2!

Listen at ClimateChangedPodcast.org or on your favorite podcast listening platform.

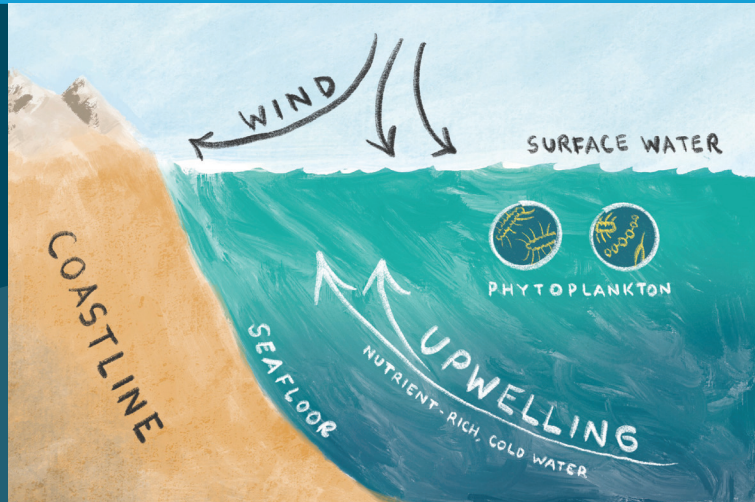


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We've named our print newsletter *Upwelling*, an ecological term that relates to coastal ecosystems such as our own, where winds blow strongly and frequently across the surface of the ocean near the coastline, creating movement that allows for a complex, diverse ecosystem to thrive. Now, perhaps more than ever, we need creative movement and imaginative regeneration to meet the spiritual challenges of our ecological crises. Without the communal work of bringing forth new life from the depths of our traditions, we risk stagnation and despair. With this in mind, at The BTS Center, we think of the work we are offering as a kind of upwelling, existing at the confluence of spirituality and ecology, catalyzing spiritual imagination with enduring wisdom for transformative faith leadership.

Illustration by David Bruggink, 2022



You are invited.

As we continue to focus on spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world, we are grateful for our many friends, program participants, partners, and donors, and we extend a warm invitation to join in this work.

- Visit thebtscenter.org and explore Upcoming Programs.
- Check out our Leadership Commons, Video Library, *Climate Changed* Podcast, and Earthbound Practices — all at thebtscenter.org — for resources you can use within your faith community or for your own personal growth.
- Support the work of The BTS Center with a financial gift.
- Share this newsletter with a friend or colleague.

Our Mission

To catalyze spiritual imagination with enduring wisdom for transformative faith leadership.