



Environment: Guests in God's World

What if an environmental unit reflected on biblical imagery?

Maria taught in a church school and wanted to reframe her environmental unit in terms of being guests in God's world, rather than owners of it. She wanted to explore a range of biblical images to help students to think differently about the way people interact with the environment.

"I changed the central framework of the unit from being about 'our' world (implying ownership) to being guests in God's world. The rest of the unit did not need much changing. I went through material that I had produced, and changed the phrases 'our world' or 'the world' to 'God's world.' I did the same for the displays and how outcomes were worded. I also displayed five word images with appropriate pictures next to them.

I introduced the lesson by asking students what interaction with the environment each image might encourage:

1. Responsible ruler
2. Gardener
3. Caretaker
4. Guest/tenant
5. Earth tamer

"I taught the unit as usual, looking at the way people interact with the environment using various case studies. Students looked at the case studies and decided on a word or phrase (not from the display) that would describe the interaction in each one. In groups, students selected a case study that had attracted a negative label and chose a positive label from the display, such as 'gardener.' They discussed what change of behavior would be needed by the community in the case study in order to earn the new label.

"At the end, I explained that all the word images on the display came from the Bible and are used to describe human interactions with the environment. Some, such as ruler, can

be misused to justify an exploitative relationship. I gave students a sheet about the word images and asked them to choose the one they thought would encourage people today to have a positive relationship with the environment. We shared this in a brief discussion.

1. Ruler: Hebrew rulers were only rulers *under God*, and the Bible connects rule with service. The world was not theirs to do with as they liked. Rule implies that humans have responsibility for the earth.
2. Gardener: Adam was assigned to look after the Garden of Eden. Christians view the earth as God's garden, a gift that people should respond to with gratitude.
3. Caretaker: Adam was told to care for the garden, which stands for our world.
4. Guests: People are guests in God's world, tenants of his land. They are not owners.
5. Earth tamers: God tells people to subdue the earth, but if people are to mirror God, as they are called to, that means bringing creative order, not destruction."

What's going on here?

Maria **saw** the environment in terms of being a guest in God's world. She wanted to change the unit from a self-orientated perspective (our world) to a God-and-others perspective that sees the world as a gift.

She **engaged** students in conversation around a series of new metaphors (guests, caretakers, gardeners, etc.) from the Bible that could point them to different ways of engaging with the world. Maria also changed how students experienced the topic (using word images with case studies) and engaged them in looking critically at the teaching resources from a new perspective (in light of biblical images).

She **reshaped her practice** by choosing intentional language (using consistent key phrases and word images) and by working the desired perspective consistently into the resources, the display, the lesson introduction, and the class discussion.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Ownership is basic to our culture, and the idea of not owning the world goes against the grain. We naturally put the label “mine” or “ours” on things. The Bible speaks of God as creator and sustainer of the earth; it is his world. God placed people in his world to enjoy it and look after it, not to own it or exploit it. This creation gift was an expression of God’s **love** and his **faith** in people. Faith in this world as God’s world also communicates hope, as this world belongs to him; and its ultimate destiny rests with God, though people are called to work with God in caring for the earth.

What difference does it make?

There is a huge difference between viewing ourselves as guests in God’s world and viewing ourselves as owners. The former changes the relationship with the environment to one of stewardship.

Where could we go from here?

Maria checked the wording and display materials in her unit to see whether they were sending the message she wanted. Units on other topics might have a different framing concept, but this strategy of making the language consistent and having students explicitly reflect on the language change could still be applied. There may also be other areas in which students could measure a case study against biblical terms (for instance, the choices of a literary character in English class).

Digging deeper

The Bible states that the world is God’s (Psalm 24:1; Deuteronomy 10:14). It is his by right of creation (Genesis 1:1). In Genesis, God entrusts the world to people as caretakers (Genesis 2:15), giving them rule over the earth in the sense of bringing creative order and exercising responsibility (Genesis 1:26). The land is described as belonging to God (Leviticus 25:23), with people as tenants in the land (God’s guests). This may seem a harsh way of putting the position of people in relation to the land, but the context in ancient

Israel was that every 50 years land was redistributed so that great estates did not build up while leaving people homeless. It took more than a strong statement that “you are tenants” to remind the Israelites that they did not own this land and that a redistribution was God’s prerogative as owner. We have used the expression “God’s guests” to capture some of the same emphasis in a way that can appeal to students.

Most of environmental ethics and sustainable development policy could be based precisely on the viewpoint of the guest. Just think of what you would and wouldn't do as a guest in someone else's home. How much would you eat from their table—even if you felt it were a banquet laid for you? Would you chop up the furniture for kindling? Kill the pets? Deny other guests their share of the host's bounty? Whether we base this sensibility on belief in God or not—we are indeed guests, here for a twinkling in the cosmic long haul. We continue acting as the haughty master of the house at our peril. From Jeremy Benstein, “The People and the Book,” in the Jerusalem Report, October 7, 2002

In the Bible, people are created on the same day as animals, expressing their oneness with the animal kingdom. Adam (meaning “human”) is created from the earth (Hebrew adama). Adam was literally an “earthling,” underlining our connection to the planet. People and the environment are closely related in the Bible; when people err, creation suffers ([2 Chronicles 7:13-14](#)). The Bible has guidelines on the environment, from caring for birds’ nests to protecting fruit trees in times of war. These guidelines preserved the environment for future generations ([Numbers 35:33-34](#); [Deuteronomy 20:19](#); [Deuteronomy 22:6](#)).



Previous: Maps and Local Needs
What if looking at the local area hel...

Next: God’s World
What if an environmental unit refle...



