



## Environment: God's World

### What if an environmental unit reflected 'Our world' as 'God's world'?

Allison taught in a private Christian school and wanted to reframe her environmental unit in terms of being guests in God's world rather than owners.

"I wanted to change the framework of the unit but felt the content did not need changing. I went through the material and changed the phrases 'our world' or 'the world' to 'God's world.' I did the same for the displays and for how the outcomes were worded. I arranged one display to demonstrate that the world belongs to God by headlining the display 'We Live in God's Word.' I added pictures of people and the heading 'Guests in God's World.' I also used images of different environments from the perspective of what, in art, might be called a 'God's eye' view.

"I changed the way I introduced the topic by bringing in a globe wrapped as a gift, to which I had attached a label: 'To my people, with love from God.' I invited my students to unwrap the gift and discuss (a) the motive behind giving a gift and (b) what it means to receive a gift. We also talked about looking after gifts we have received and went on to discuss how we would look after something precious we had been given on loan. I referred students to the display, and we role-played being a guest and how not to treat another person's home. I summed up our discussion: 'The world is a gift that we have been entrusted with, we have been given the job of caring for it. It is God's world and we are his special guests, so we live in the world trusting him and remembering it belongs him.'

"There were some things I could not change in the teaching resources, so I asked the class to find all the incidences of 'our world' or 'the world' in the resources to draw their attention to the different phrasing. I changed one art task. I asked them to draw parts of God's world from what is known as a 'God's eye' view—for example, forests and rivers from above. This led to talking about God being everywhere."

### What's going on here?

Allison **saw** the environment in terms of being a guest in God's world. She wanted to change the unit from a self-oriented perspective (our world) to a God-and-others perspective that sees the world as a gift and trusts God as the one who gives it to us.

She **engaged** students in conversation around a new metaphor (from owners to guests) and used it to point them to a different way of engaging with the world. Allison also framed the way students experienced the topic (gift-wrapped globe, God's-eye views) and engaged students in looking critically at the teaching resources from within the new framework.

She **reshaped her practice** by choosing intentional language (building her lesson around consistent key words) and working the desired perspective consistently into the resources, the display, a focal object to introduce the lesson, 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 refer to things as "mine" or "ours." The Bible speaks of God as creator and sustainer of the earth: this 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. 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 seeing ourselves as owners. The former changes the relationship with the environment to one of stewardship.

## Where could we go from here?

Allison 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 concept that acts as a framework (e.g., service), but whatever concept is used, this strategy of making the language consistent and having students explicitly reflect on the language change could still be applied.

## Digging deeper

The Bible states that the world is God's ([Psalm 24:1](#); [Deuteronomy 10:14](#)) 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](#)), and people are tenants in the land. 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 God called people to redistribute land every 50 years so that great estates did not build up while others were 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 if God wanted to redistribute it, that was his prerogative as owner. (It is not known how far this was practiced.) We have used the expression "guests of God" 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," quoted 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 (in Hebrew adamah). Adam was literally an "earthling," underlining our connection to the planet. People and the environment are closely related in the Bible; when people go wrong, 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](#)).



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