

# **Health:** Responsibility and Community

## What if picking up litter connected words and actions?

Elizabeth wanted to raise her students' awareness of their responsibility to the environment. They all said they cared about the environment but still regularly littered.

"I deliberately dropped one piece of scrap paper on the floor. We discussed our responsibility to care for the environment, during which they all agreed that it was wrong to litter.

"What about that?" I asked. The class then noticed the paper.

"I asked: 'Is there anyone here thinking, But it's only one piece of litter'?"

"I gave each child a piece of scrap paper, which they crumpled up. Then we passed around a box, and each child dropped their paper into the box and said, 'But it's only one piece of paper!'

"I took the box and added my own paper and said, 'But its only one piece of paper,' and then dumped them all over the floor.

"We talked about how thinking our litter was 'just one piece of paper' soon added up, and about how we had a bigger effect together than we did individually. This also meant that we could make a real difference together. Then we looked at what the Bible says about responsibility to the environment. We explored the idea of the world being on loan from God and people as 'earth keepers' on God's behalf."

## What's going on here?

Elizabeth saw her lesson on the environment as a way of helping students bring their words and actions into line so that they were challenged to change and beliefs were practiced.

She engaged students in rethinking their existing habits and assumptions, experiencing a concrete simulation of consequences, and experiencing dissonance (talking about environmental responsibility with litter on the floor).

She reshaped her practice by changing the atmosphere she created through the classroom environment (litter on the floor), and thereby made students' existing assumptions explicit, using objects to focus students' attention, and explicitly connecting faith and life.

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

Faith is not an abstract set of beliefs but something that is to be practiced and expressed in a way of life lived with others. Dismissing litter as “nothing to do with me” would not match a belief that humanity has been given the earth to care for. We often fall short in expressing our faith consistently in our actions.

## What difference does it make?

Elizabeth is laying foundations for seeing faith and beliefs as something to be practiced, not just held abstractly. This is part of creating a mindset that does not divorce what is learned and believed from what is lived. She also is encouraging her students that their actions can add up to make a difference.

## Where do we go from here?

Children today are very engaged in questions about the environment and issues of fair trade and environmental sustainability, and these can be good topics through which to teach about the life of faith and the radical choices it requires us to make in order for whole communities to flourish.

## Digging deeper

Knowledge and knowing in the Bible are not just about collecting information, but about learning for life. The words the Bible uses for knowledge include information, but they also cover personal relationships and experience. In Psalm 8, the psalmist looks at the skies and sees the wonders of creation; then he thinks about his own place in the universe. He does not just store information ([Psalm 8:3-4](#)).

The Bible calls people to serve their wider communities and work for their well-being ([Jeremiah 29:7](#)), which includes caring for the environment. In Genesis, God describes the world as “very good”, and entrusts the world to people as caretakers ([Genesis 2:15](#)). People were given rule over the earth in the sense of bringing creative order and exercising responsibility ([Genesis 1:28](#)). Caring for the earth is a charge to Christian communities, not just individuals, for the land is on loan; it belongs to God ([Psalm 24:1](#)). The Bible has guidelines on the environment, from caring for birds’ nests to protecting fruit trees in times of war ([Deuteronomy 20:19-20](#)). These guidelines preserved the environment for future generations.

*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*



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