

Watershed disciples: Studying the local landscape

by [Katherine Mast](#) in the [October 29, 2014](#) issue



PARCHED: The dry Rio Grande irrigation canal at the Mesilla diversion dam in New Mexico reflects the impact of the region’s crippling drought. © MARILYN HADDRILL

The drought in the American West is harrowing. In California, where almost half the fruits, vegetables, and nuts for the United States are grown, the drought is labeled D4—“exceptional,” the highest category—by the U.S. Drought Monitor. Though summer rains brought a reprieve to portions of New Mexico and Texas, much of the region saw the drought intensify throughout the summer.

Cycles of drought have long been part of the southwestern landscape, but the current drought trends are exacerbated by a generally warming climate. The vast majority of scientists agree that global trends of climate change are human-caused, largely due to the burning of fossil fuels. It’s predicted that if the current pattern continues, the Southwest will see hotter, drier summers, deepening drought, and more severe wildfires. Predictions for other regions around the world are equally sobering. Yet convincing Americans to change their use of fossil fuels has proven to be exceptionally difficult.

At the Bartimaeus Institute in Oak View, California, Ched Myers and Elaine Enns have been working to change the way that American Christians think and act on issues

related to climate change. They call their approach “watershed discipleship.” It focuses congregations’ attention on their own neighborhood and landscape. By working at a profoundly local level, Myers and Enns hope to build a Christian environmental movement that is both deep and wide.

Every watershed is connected to every other watershed; water issues in one region affect the water issues in another. And as people respond to the needs in their own particular place, they are simultaneously shaping the experiences of people in another.

The local church provides, Enns and Myers believe, the perfect location to foster this understanding, because like watersheds, churches are linked. Understanding can build from one church to the next.

The first, most fundamental meaning of watershed discipleship is based on the ecological principle of watershed basins: ridge lines in a landscape direct the flow of rainfall from a broad region to a central, lower point—often a river or lake.

“Our lives are bounded by hydrologic systems,” says Enns. Watershed discipleship requires first that we understand the places we live and realize that all our actions as Christians take place within a particular landscape.

Last spring, Albuquerque Mennonite Church in New Mexico invited Myers and Enns for a weekend-long exploration of watershed discipleship. Months before, the congregation had committed itself to engaging environmental concerns, but the commitment had met with some resistance. Some members were wary of becoming a one-issue church; others felt that the environmental movement has become elitist and neglected other issues central to the church, such as poverty and immigration.

Anita Amstutz, pastor of Albuquerque Mennonite, stressed that those issues are interrelated. “*People* are part of the watershed too, and their issues are intricately tied to the watershed.” In April, Myers and Enns led several dozen people from New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, and Texas—not incidentally from end to end of the Rio Grande watershed—in an environmental and theological exploration of the Rio Grande Valley.

In the San Juan mountains, to the north of Albuquerque in Colorado, mountain streams merge to form the tributaries of the Rio Grande. The river meanders at the feet of the mountains, gathering force and widening on its journey east to Alamosa,

Colorado, before curving south, traveling the length of New Mexico. Finally, it becomes the international border between Mexico and Texas. In its 1,900-mile course, the Rio Grande drains 182,200 square miles, and its watershed is home to roughly 10 million people.

The Rio Grande is struggling. With poor winter snowfall and weak summer monsoons, New Mexico is in its sixth consecutive year of drought, and steady rates of population growth and development have put increasing stress on water resources. During recent summers, expanses of the river have run dry, exposing a cracking, dusty riverbed.

It would take a full day to drive between the Anabaptist Fellowship of Alamosa in Colorado and Rey de Gloria Church in Brownsville, Texas. Members of both congregations met in Albuquerque and came away with a new perception of their shared realities.

“Alamosa has a lot in common with Brownsville, though nothing in our culture would tell us that,” says Myers. “Only the watershed reflects that reality.”

Together the churches are discussing shared approaches to the issues of immigration rights and environmental devastation. Acting alone, a congregation might know its impact in its own community but feel like a small drop in a very large bucket, says Amstutz. Simply knowing that other churches within this large watershed are addressing similar issues is encouraging, and collaboration can help strengthen each church’s actions while offering a deeper understanding.

In another part of the country, the Mennonite Creation Care Network and staff at the Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center in northern Indiana recently published an adult education curriculum that includes principles of watershed discipleship. It is being used by several Mennonite congregations.

Course participants begin with a map of the church’s neighborhood, drawing a five-mile radius circle around the church’s doorstep and using this circle to hone their focus. In subsequent lessons, they identify waterways and other environmental landmarks, resources and public services, and environmental concerns.

“When talking about Creation Care in a broader sense, it all seems very big and depressing,” says Kay Hershberger, who helps leads a Sunday school class at College Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana. “When looking at our own backyard,

in our own homes, we can see the realistic steps we can take.”

When Myers talks about watershed discipleship, however, the term refers to more than just understanding a local landscape and a particular cultural reality. It is also a metaphor for the urgency of this work. We are living in a watershed moment, says Myers. We are at a critical point in history, and the decisions we make now will set the course for the future.

Myers and Enns know that they have an uphill battle. Christian-based environmental movements are lagging behind secular efforts. “We’re five to ten years behind the curve,” Myers says.

A study published this year in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* came to a similar conclusion. In “An Examination of the ‘Greening of Christianity’ Thesis among Americans, 1993–2010,” John Clements of Michigan State and colleagues compared data from the General Social Surveys of 1993 with those of 2010 and found that despite the attention to environmental concerns given by some Christian organizations, U.S. Christians remained “less pro-environmental than non-Christians, all other things equal.” Overall, Christians aren’t as concerned about the dangers of air and water pollution as their non-Christian counterparts and were less willing to make personal sacrifices, like cutting down on driving, in response to environmental concerns.

Myers and Enns hope that an invitation to thinking about faith through a watershed lens will close that divide.