



Earth Week 2026: Caring for God's Creation

By: Bruce Pokarney

Three decades ago, a formal connection was made between faith and our environment when the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) established the statement, *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice*. The ELCA's teachings are grounded in scripture and God's intentions for the healing and wholeness of his creation.

Fast forward to Earth Week 2026 and its signature observances of Earth Day and Arbor Day. Awareness of being good stewards of the planet is at the forefront for one of Bethlehem's true conservationists.



"If we don't care enough to protect the environment we live in, we can't really live happy, full lives and be joyous, faithful people," says Aaron Kiesz, Aberdeen City Forester and longtime Bethlehem member.

It's Aaron's belief that God created our planet, with all its abundance of life and natural resources, and charged us with shepherding it rather than mistreating or exploiting it.

"He gave us a template to work with," says Aaron. "Our population has been growing and progressing rapidly, but we need to keep in mind the importance of caring for the world we live in— whether it's protecting water quality, the air we breathe, or the land that we depend on to grow our food. Events like Earth Day and Arbor Day are reminders of what God has given us."

Aaron Kiesz has been a part of Bethlehem since birth. He was baptized and confirmed in the old church. After graduating from South Dakota State University

with a horticulture degree, he took a forestry job in Aberdeen with the State Department of Agriculture.

When a promotion came up that would move him to Pierre, Aaron reluctantly took the job not knowing that's where he would meet his future wife, Alison, and shortly return to Aberdeen as City Forester. Aaron and Alison added Wyatt and Cody to the family and all of them have been very active in various teams and activities within Bethlehem.



A city forester is not simply a tree expert. Certainly, Aaron Kiesz has the expertise to monitor and help maintain the health of the city's many trees from potential threats of pests and disease. But there are dozens of tasks that go with the job, including the planting of new trees along street boulevards and city parks. One of his favorite parts of the job is when he gets to help a homeowner who might have a tree problem.

"I really enjoy making sure people are happy with the trees on their property and around their homes," he says.

Another highlight is seeing the joy people have while visiting the Kuhnert Arboretum in south Aberdeen, which is connected to Bethlehem through the Moccasin Creek recreational trail. That's another connection Aaron has made with his own faith journey.

"Faith can give you peace and happiness. It's like going to the Arboretum, you want to come home feeling good. I haven't seen many people out there or some other city park who were not smiling. That's what nature and our natural resources can provide."

Even a seemingly simple planting of trees in the islands of Bethlehem's parking lot in recent years has provided an aesthetic aspect to the church's property, not to mention more shade as the years go by and the trees get bigger.

Bethlehem's mission of welcoming, worshiping, teaching, and serving can be blended into an Earth Week message. The area's parks, lakes, and open spaces welcome everyone to enjoy what God has provided. They can be places of peace and tranquility, offering an opportunity to worship more closely. The environment provides a living classroom for everyone to be taught about the value of conservation. And then there's serving.

"By appreciating our natural resources, you are serving God because you are protecting what he created," says Aaron. "During this special week, think about what we have been given and realize what each of us can do to take care of what has been created."

As the ELCA Caring for Creation statement declares, humans are to be loving caretakers of all God called good.



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