

Caring for our Common Home

To treat creation, from worms to banana peels to Neighbours, as if your life depends on it. Sam Ewell
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AMERICANS HAVE A PENCHANT for displaying their beliefs on bumper stickers. A few years ago, a friend gave me a bumper sticker that I display on my laptop: Treat the earth as if your life depends on it. The authority given for this command is Genesis 2:15, which says, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.”

This is my daily reminder that caring for the earth is integral to our human vocation. There is an inextricable connection between *adam* – literally, the “earth creature” – and *adamah*, the fertile soil from which God created him. Growing into our biblical job description in the midst of a throwaway culture requires an ecological conversion – an ongoing process of remembering that vocation to care for our common home. My own ecological conversion took place as I learned to reimagine missionary work from the “ground up” – that is, as an expression of discipleship, hospitality, and friendship, in a concrete place.

I DON’T BELONG FULLY TO ANY SINGLE CULTURE: I was born and raised in the southern United States, have lived in Brazil, and now reside in Birmingham, England. Even in the historically conservative Bible Belt, I grew up as a moderate mainline Protestant, and while I was grateful for this nurturing Christian context, I knew there had to be more to following Jesus. It was some time before I connected treating the earth as if my life depends upon it with my decision to accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Saviour.

One step of my journey took place in Brazil, where I met Claudio Oliver, a pastor and the elder of Casa da Videira, an intentional Christian community. Like an older brother, Claudio challenged me to reimagine what it means to be a missionary and sowed the seeds of my ecological conversion. During our first meeting, Claudio spoke enthusiastically of a Catholic priest and intellectual named Ivan Illich. I left that visit with a copy of Illich’s 1968 address, “To Hell with Good Intentions.” In it, Illich criticized missionary activity in which “do-gooders” impose their “good intentions” on others, rather than allowing themselves to be transformed by those they encounter. I was reading it as a US national serving as a missionary in Brazil; Illich’s talk was, to say the least, a jolt to my system. His message exposed the insular missionary bubble that had slowly formed around me.

I had not gone to Brazil out of a sense of heroic duty to help people; I had married a Brazilian, and in the spirit of Ruth and Naomi, her people became my people. But somewhere along the way, I became distracted by missionary ideals and good intentions. Illich’s proposal – to come, but not in the role of helper – challenged the temptation to see myself as a foreign problem-solver. Yet the more I read Illich, the more I also realized he was not letting me off the hook. He was advocating a different kind of presence – a more conscious, more subversive presence.



Gardening at Casa da Videira Image courtesy of Helena Novelletto

During my second encounter with Claudio, I caught a glimpse of mission beyond good intentions. I noticed him making short trips to the balcony of his fifth-floor apartment, and asked what he was doing. He showed me his colony of composting worms, called a wormery, and a vertical garden. Varieties of lettuce and root crops grew inside upcycled two-litre bottles filled with the compost. Instead of treating all of his food waste as garbage, Claudio explained, he fed it to his worms, which then turned it into rich soil.

Claudio's little balcony garden was an experiment in treating creation as sacred. He wanted to offer signs of life in the midst of so much pollution and waste – twin symptoms of our throwaway culture. He explained that he was working his way back to the earth, back to the soil he longed to care for.

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I mentioned that I, too, wanted to set up a wormery on my balcony, but instead of giving me a pep talk, he gave me a warning: “Of course, you can do a wormery from your balcony, and you should. But I have to warn you that if you do, it is the most subversive thing that you can do inside your home.” Claudio picked up a decomposing banana peel to make his point:

In the beginning, God created and said, “It is good.” This banana peel that I am holding is good. And if God says it is good, then by whose authority do we treat it like garbage? The truth is, we are not authorized to treat it that way. And if you begin to handle your own food discards – like this banana peel – as creation, instead of garbage, then it will never be garbage again. You will rethink what we are called to do with creation. So, man, it is subversive, because composting food waste is about learning to repent and rethink how we care for God's good creation.

I had studied academic theology for years, and could recite the Christian doctrine of creation, yet my most profound understanding of it came through these words and deeds offered by a friend.

FROM 2008 TO 2010, I was adopted by Casa da Videira. The wormery experiment led to a growing scheme in our apartment building, as well as an urban garden at a local nursery run by Catholic sisters. By becoming immersed in this network of humus and humans, I began to recognize two different ways of engaging in Christian mission: as a technical problem to be solved, or as a relational possibility to be shared.

When I arrived in Brazil, my missionary strategy was focused on problems and driven by ideals. But Casa da Videira worked successfully at the grassroots level by cultivating relationships from within the existing context, problems and all. I saw the community welcome conservatives and liberals, vegans and omnivores, eco-activists and reactionaries. Around the table at Casa da Videira, I was changed – not because people tried to change me, but because they were transparent about living out the change they envisioned. I had spent time with eco-warriors, but often left uninspired by their arguments and statistics. The people at Casa da Videira listened patiently to my good intentions, and then gave me the encouragement that I needed to bring forth a new missionary imagination. In their uniquely Brazilian, backhanded humour, they'd give me the compliment: “Sam, you are the best failure of an American missionary that we have ever met!”

What does good news look like in the midst of a culture of the discarded?

The Portuguese edition of Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, intriguingly translates “throwaway culture” as a *cultura do descarte*, literally “culture of the discarded.” Rather than seeking to cultivate an idyllic community insulated from the wounds of a throwaway culture, the members of Casa da Videira ask, “What does good news look like in the midst of a *cultura do descarte*?”

While operating as a faith-based organization, Casa da Videira has become a leader in the use of urban agriculture, food production, and waste management as tools of social innovation, economic inclusion, and political transformation. But the community does not experiment with urban agriculture and food production as ends in themselves. Rather, inspired by the metaphor of Jesus as the vine (John 15:1–17), Casa da Videira – which means “House of the Vine” – has undertaken these endeavours in order to share the good news that comes through friendship with Jesus. A crucial part of this work is attending to the discarded parts of creation. As Claudio describes it:

We understand that what Jesus offers to us is this sensation of being alive, enjoying life, living abundantly. All this starts when we look to those pieces of life, sent to die as garbage, and reintroduce them into the cycle of life, respecting them as part of creation. It’s a process that begins in the soil and ends at our tables. We harvest our veggies from this cycle, we breed our animals inside of it. . . . Where the world sees garbage, we see nourishment; where the world sees death, we see life; in a world of loneliness, we discover community.

Laudato Si’ holds that ecological conversion is not reducible to “self-improvement on the part of individuals,” rather, it requires a “community conversion.” No doubt, we need to experience a personal change of heart, but that change is never a private affair. Ecological conversion takes place around dinner tables and through working together in garden plots. It requires not only a new “I,” but also a new “we.”

MY ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION CONTINUED in the United Kingdom, where I moved with my family to complete my doctoral work in practical theology. Along with another family, we committed to live intentionally in the neighbourhood of Summerfield, in inner-city Birmingham, England. Inspired by Casa da Videira, I looked at our context and asked: What if we imagined the work of intercultural mission – of entering into another’s garden – not by planting another church, as I had done in Brazil, but by cultivating abundant community from the ground up?

In contemplating missionary work as gardening, I reflected on the biological phenomenon known as the “edge effect.” In ecological systems, an edge is the frontier between two habitats. For example, the shoreline is the edge between a pond (aquatic habitat) and a field (land habitat). Edges characteristically exhibit more biodiversity than single ecosystems. Good gardeners mimic this principle by designing and cultivating edges that will enhance biodiversity and beneficial interactions.



Wormery at Casa da Videira Image courtesy of Helena Novelletto

We can also observe the edge effect in the interactions between people and habitats. Especially in cities like Birmingham, cultural diversity is an everyday, sometimes intense, reality. The main street of Summerfield is lined with ethnic shops and restaurants, churches, and mosques. At our child's primary school, forty-four languages are spoken! The second largest men's prison in England is located in our neighbourhood, and many prisoners are released to resettle in the local community. Whereas in biological systems, the edge effect naturally tends towards greater biodiversity and resilience, in human ecology, interactions at these edges may be beneficial or harmful, even violent.

To cultivate the edges in Summerfield, we founded a group called Companions for Hope, which brings together the "institutional church" habitat and the "neighbourhood" habitat. Most participants in Companions worship regularly with local churches. Companions seeks to further ecumenical unity, so that different members of the neighbourhood can meet and relate to one another as members of the same body of Christ. Practically, we are involved in a range of local initiatives: community gardens, prison ministry, community development, neighbourhood meals and social events, "Places of Welcome," discipleship groups, and prayer meetings.

Connecting with the food cycle has become a vital way of cultivating hope in our neighbourhood, as engaging in the convivial practices of growing and sharing food is the best way we've found of sharing what we have received with others. In this way, our mission in Summerfield is more than a set of programs for "fixing" things; it is a relational possibility among friends and neighbours – as *Laudato Si'* puts it, "attitudes which together foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness." The people and places we encounter are not projects, and they are definitely not clients. They are our neighbours and friends, our parks and green spaces – and all in our common home.

THE BREXIT REFERENDUM, which happened soon after we relocated to Summerfield, catalysed resentment towards immigrants and foreigners – two groups that Summerfield has in abundance. Foreigners ourselves, we began to share meals with neighbours and have conversations with local people about life in the neighbourhood. We soon realized that fellow residents are not automatically neighbours in a place as diverse as Summerfield. It requires intentionality to shift from happening to live nearby to being true neighbours. So Companions for Hope launched monthly Neighbour Nights, which bring people together around food to get to know each other. We drew inspiration from Ephesians 2:14, which speaks of breaking "down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

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One of the key figures in these events has been a Polish woman named Ewa. We first met Ewa when our dog, Rio, spotted her foraging for blackberries. During a few minutes' chat, we learned that she had lived locally for twelve years, was trained as a chef, and had been looking for a place to share her passion for cooking.

Ewa helped us kick off our first Neighbour Night as lead chef, and she has not missed one yet! Ewa has also recruited others from the local Polish community to join in. She has shown herself to be a skilled chef who has a real gift for bringing people together around food, and she has become a key character in the story of our neighbourhood.

A neighbourhood is like an ecology of relationships. Gardeners know that plants do not flourish in isolation from their environment; rather, they flourish because of it, dependent on the quality of the soil, light, and water. Gardeners will often design “companion planting” to create symbiotic exchanges between plants. The gifts of people like Ewa are like seeds: powerful, yet dormant, unless exposed to the right conditions. The friendships that spring up among neighbours are the soil, water, warmth, and light that allow these seeds to grow.



Cucumbers and tomatoes grown at Casa da Vedeira Image courtesy of Helena Novelette

AS WE CULTIVATE THE EDGES OF THE URBAN MARGINS, I keep returning both to *Laudato Si'* and to the insights of Ivan Illich. *Laudato Si'* articulates a spirituality for recovering care in a throwaway culture. In making an appeal for “a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness,” Pope Francis traces a clear path through our culture of the discarded. He writes, “Christian spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life, and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption.” He reminds us that we are inherently social beings, created for the communion that care makes possible.

It is Illich who articulates why we must decouple “quality of life” and “life of consumption.” In *Tools for Conviviality*, he went so far as to say, “The only solution to the environmental crisis is the shared insight of people that they would be happier if they could *work* together and *care* for each other.” This possibility, like the kingdom of God, is “at hand,” if we would only repent and enter it.

The Creator’s call to care for our common home has never been more urgent, and requires a range of faithful responses, from individual and grassroots efforts to major policy and legislative changes. Through gardening and food production, the church is offering demonstration plots of abundant life: sites where even in the margins, we tend the earth and one another. What is needed is the cultivation of community where ecological conversion is possible; and of communities where neighbours can work together and live abundantly.