

## George Fox Evangelical Seminary offers Christian Earthkeeping, merging the Bible and environmentalism

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**Carrie Sturrock, Special to The Oregonian**

To Josh Friberg, environmentalism and evangelical Christianity aren't mutually exclusive. He cares deeply about climate change -- and is a follower of Jesus Christ. That's why every Thursday night, you'll find him and 15 other students at **George Fox Evangelical Seminary** studying Christian Earthkeeping.

For too long climate change and sustainable living have been the domain of secular environmentalism, even though there's a biblical basis for why Christians should care for the Earth, says the professor who created the new course.

In Genesis 2:15 God commands humankind "to cultivate and keep it."

"This is the single most important social justice issue facing humankind today," says Daniel Brunner, a professor of Christian history at the seminary, an Evangelical Quaker institution in Southwest Portland. "Therefore, it needs to be the single most important social justice issue the church engages in."

Lest you think this is some "only in Portland" trend among evangelical Christians, it's not. George Fox has initiated the course just as other Christian schools across the country have launched similar studies. In a 2009 survey by the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, 41 percent of responding campuses reported courses in sustainability, and of those who didn't, 43 percent planned to start one. Christians are changing their perspective.

"We've allowed our leaders and our theology to characterize people who care about creation as somehow being Earth worshippers, as somehow being anti-God and pro-planet, and I don't understand how that came to be," says Dodd Galbreath, executive director of the **Institute for Sustainable Practice at Lipscomb University**, a faith-based institution in Nashville, Tenn. "Why would you stand in front of your creator and say, 'I was waiting for you to fix it?'"

The George Fox class includes students of various Christian denominations and some who already minister to congregations or plan to. Brunner describes himself as a progressive evangelical concerned about gender and racial equality and the environment.

The first year of the two-year Christian Earthkeeping course focuses on the Old Testament and living more gently with the Earth. It includes a five-day retreat to consider a Native American ethic of land stewardship. The second year delves into the New Testament and includes a retreat examining the relationships among earth-keeping, global systems and issues such as sexism, racism and poverty.

At a recent class, students discussed how exploiting the planet is part of a larger problem of oppression.

And the challenge for so many who pastor churches or who plan to is to make clear that ecology is a "theological issue, that it relates intimately to their faith," says 24-year-old student Brittany Ouchida-Walsh, who leads a home-based spiritual community.

For 34-year-old Friberg, a real estate agent working on a masters of divinity, he decided that to know Jesus Christ better, he needed to garden. He never fully understood the Bible's agricultural references. That became clear the day he witnessed birds eating the grass seed he kept sowing, solving the mystery of his threadbare lawn.

In his effort to understand, he now has an extensive garden, composts and keeps bees and chickens. It's the same reason a lot of churches now have community gardens, he says.

Referencing an article by Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," Friberg says the charge traditionally leveled against Christianity by environmentalists is that Christians value nature only for the way it can be used.

That's not how Friberg sees it.

"The things God created have their own value," he says. "So a tree is valuable because God made it and thinks it was important to make a tree and not because it can warm my house as firewood or be made into a chair."

Leslie Murray, 35, is a Quaker pastor in Newberg and has decided for a class project to save every piece of garbage she generates for two months to better understand her consumption patterns. On Earth Day last April she talked to her congregation about Genesis 1 and whether people are to have dominion over the Earth or care for it. She preached about how consumption is using up the world's resources and how irresponsible that is. Caring for the Earth is basic to her Christian perspective.

"To me it's core to my belief in God and who God is."

-- **Carrie Sturrock**