



Youth at Second Presbyterian Church in MO. Photo credit: Donald Cochran

# The Next Generation Rises

*“Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.”*

1 Tim. 4:12

The Lord created every living being on this world to flourish—to be fruitful and multiply. For millennia, humanity has benefitted from the beauty of this world, the produce from our fields, and the abundance of our seas. As we face the reality of our world today, we must consider what kind of world we want to leave to those who come after us: What are we passing on to children who are just now being born and growing up? Children, with their energy, their creative spirit, and their love for all of God’s world, are showing us the way toward a future of hope.

[www.creationjustice.org/nextgeneration](http://www.creationjustice.org/nextgeneration)

# The Generational Outlook

**“You shall tell your child on that day. ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips; for with a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt.”** Exodus 13:8-9

An often unobserved cultural difference between biblical and modern times pertains to how and how often people think in terms of generations—past, present, and future. In the contemporary culture of the United States, it is common to focus largely upon the immediate concerns of the present generation. By contrast, the outlook that pervades the Bible is one that continually orients itself to both past and future generations. Consider prominent ways this becomes manifest in the Bible whether it is through genealogies, historical perspectives, views on the future, understandings of sin, or interpretations of justice.

## GENEALOGY MATTERS

While researching the family tree is a hobby for some today, genealogies were of enormous significance in biblical times. In the Hebrew Scriptures, there are two dozen genealogical lists. In the New Testament, Matthew and Luke present the genealogies of Jesus. Genealogies established one’s identity. In the universe of faith, if you wanted to say who you were, you named those from whom you descended.

## HISTORY MATTERS

It should go without saying that the Jewish and Christian faiths are all about knowing your history, but the origins of our rootedness in history have a distinct generational dimension. Consider how the book of Exodus stresses the importance of children learning about the liberation of the Hebrew people from Egypt. It was so important that this lesson was to be emblazoned on one’s hand and forehead.

Family Camp at Warwick Conference Center and Camp, Warwick, NY.  
Photo credit: Monica Schaap Pierce

## THE FUTURE MATTERS

When it comes to blessings in the Bible, it is often future generations that are the focus. God grants land not solely with the present in mind but with one’s future offspring in mind. To Abraham, God says, “For all the land that you see, I will give to you and to your offspring forever” (Gen. 13:15). Moreover, the covenant itself is established with reference to future generations.

**“I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”** Gen. 17:7



*Reflect: What are some of the spiritual benefits of reflecting on ancestors, history, and future generations?*



Palm Sunday Idlewood Presbyterian Church. Photo credit: Idlewood Presbyterian Church

## SIN MATTERS

While future generations receive blessings, they also receive the consequences of sin. Frequently, scriptures pertaining to the generational impact of sin are misinterpreted. Consider Exodus 20:5 which speaks of “visiting the guilt of the parent upon the children, upon the third, and upon the fourth generations.” Scholars note that this scripture is referring to one’s children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren—descendants one could very well see in one’s own lifetime. This awareness is intended to deter sin rather than to imply the transfer of the guilt itself from one generation to the next. In essence, the passage provokes a moment of reckoning with regard to how later generations will suffer as the result of present wrongs.

## JUSTICE MATTERS

Perhaps no scripture in the Bible evokes a generational outlook with such poignancy, scope, and power as the song of praise known as Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). Mary begins her song by framing that very moment within the span of generations. She declares, “Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.” She then continues to speak of a God whose mercy extends “from generation to

generation.” She ends by placing all of Israel within a generational continuum as she remembers the promise God “made to our ancestors, to Abraham, and to his descendants forever.” For Mary, this generational outlook frames and gives meaning to her outlook on justice. Within the context of generations, a moment with revolutionary implications is occurring. Indeed, Mary praises a God who “has brought down the powerful from their thrones.” The significance of Jesus’s birth speaks to a coming cascade of justice that can only be understood with reference to past and future generations.

Among people of faith, a countercultural ethic is emerging that is rooted in the generational outlook of the Bible. This outlook has enormous consequences for how we think about God’s creation and particularly time-sensitive moral challenges which are difficult to remedy as they worsen—such as species extinction, loss of safe accessible water, and climate change. Notably, in his encyclical on ecology,<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis declared “[i]ntergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us.”

*Reflect: Where and how have you seen inherited consequences of sin at work in your community today? Or of justice?*

# Youth Take on Leadership Roles

## YOUTH PROVOKE A MORAL RECKONING

Like Jeremiah's call as a youth to confront the government of his time, youth today are experiencing a call to provoke a moment of moral reckoning for our government and for society at large. In a landmark case called *Juliana v. U.S.*, 21 youth have filed a lawsuit against the United States government for its role in causing climate change and violating their rights to life, liberty, and property, while also failing to protect essential public resources.<sup>2</sup> The youth range in age from 11 to 22. As of the time of this writing, they are still waiting for their day in court as the government continues to prevent them from being heard.

For many people of faith who have rallied to support the youth plaintiffs, Kiran and Melanie Oommen have been an inspiration. Kiran is one of the 21 youth bringing the lawsuit, and he is the son of Melanie, an ordained minister

in the United Church of Christ. Melanie has written with eloquence about the prophetic actions of the youth.<sup>3</sup> She asks, "What does it look like to live hope when the very fate of our planet is at stake?" In giving her own response, she declares, "In the enduring hope of those young plaintiffs, our God abides."

Kiran himself has taken to the pulpit to bring news of the case to people of faith. He has become a compelling voice on the urgent need for action in seeking generational justice. "I signed on as a plaintiff because climate change haunts me every day, and all I can think to do right now is speak out. We have built a platform to have our voices heard, and I feel pride, honor, and a great responsibility to use it for the betterment of our world."<sup>4</sup>

## TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

Deliris M. Agosto Centeno and Kirsten Rumsey participated in the United Methodist Women's (UMW) New Generations Climate Justice Program 2016.<sup>5</sup> Begun as a training platform for younger generations of UMW, the aim of the program was to help these youth build the necessary skills to educate others and to receive support in their continued work as God-centered environmental actors within their communities.

Deliris lives and works in Puerto Rico. "I grew up on an island rich in resources which are possible thanks to its geographic location, agriculture, beaches, and good weather all year round. In the same way, I belong to a generation that is living a sort of a transition—from a planet with unlimited

**"The worse climate change gets, the more my generation is going to have to deal with it. And at the same time, we have no say in how it is addressed."** Kiran Oommen



Youth at climate march outside United States Capitol.  
Photo credit: Scott Hardin-Nieri

*Reflect: "We cannot represent the love of God if we aren't part of the care of God's creation" (Deliris Agosto Centeno). What part are you playing to help care for creation? Have you explored the ways your community may already be impacted through adverse ecological changes to your watershed or airshed?*

**“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”** Jeremiah 29:11

resources to one that has little time left to live. As young people it is our opportunity to make the changes.” Deliris believes the church was instrumental in her development as a person and in showing her how to love and care for God’s creation. She points out that the “church must not only be a place to find God, but also a space for the design of activities that lead us to obtain greater awareness of the environment that surrounds us and how to take care of it.”

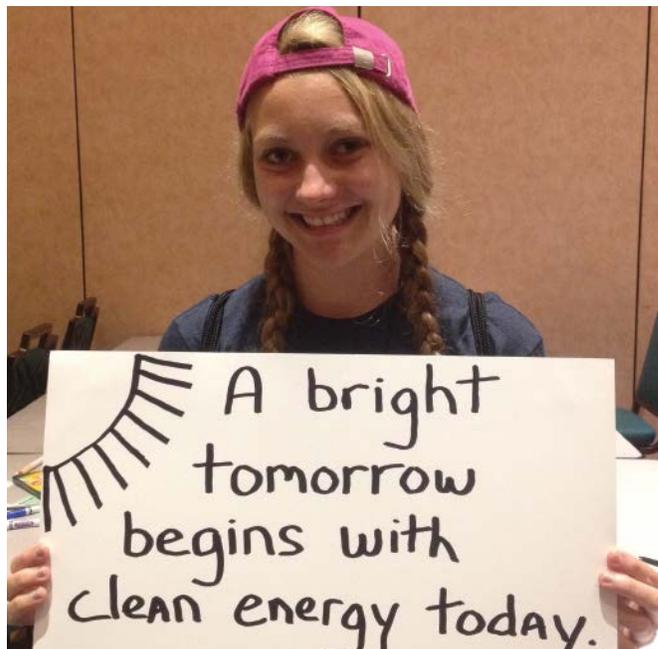
For Deliris and others, Hurricane Maria’s impact upon Puerto Rico served as a reminder that the planet is suffering and manifests itself in the only way it can, through hurricanes, cold winters or extreme droughts, and other life-threatening conditions. And yet, it also served to demonstrate the love of God revealed through the continuous work of the Church.

Kirsten credits the UMW’s program with turning her interest in environmental justice issues into a passion. Working with the UMW Environmental Justice area, she researched different environmentally unjust situations around the United States, including industrial areas, mountain top removal communities, and indigenous tribes. She was instrumental in developing the Climate Justice Simulation, a role-playing exercise based on real situations faced by three communities as they struggle to contend with and organize around environmental injustices.<sup>6</sup> Kirsten, as well as others who participated in the UMW program, continues to work towards a better future for all generations and all of God’s creation.

## THE YOUTH THAT STARTED A MOVEMENT

In 2016, the Standing Rock Movement resonated and reverberated around the world as Indigenous water protectors and their allies sought to prevent the Dakota Access Pipeline from desecrating the sacred lands and waters of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation. What much of the public failed to recognize at the time and still today was captured in a *New York Times* headline: “The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at Standing Rock.” Youth deserve a significant amount of the credit for starting a movement that inspired millions and continues to impact the world.

Youth were not only among the first to start prayer camps near the Missouri River as part of an effort to protect it from



National Youth Event of the United Church of Christ.

Photo credit: Brooks Berndt

the dangers of the immense oil pipeline, but they also were the ones who initially galvanized public attention through two long relay runs. These occurred before Standing Rock was on the radar of national moral concern. The first relay was a 500-mile run from Standing Rock to the office of the Army Corps of Engineers in Omaha, Nebraska where the youth delivered a petition. The second was a 2,000 mile relay run to DC to deliver another petition. Those actions were what began to generate the support of celebrities like Leonardo DiCaprio and Shailene Woodley. Through their efforts, the youth runners effectively propelled Standing Rock into the awareness of people across the country.

Many of the youth involved early in the movement ultimately began to call themselves the International Indigenous Youth Council. In honor of their work in launching a movement, the United Church of Christ presented the group with its inaugural Movement Makers Award. In accepting the award, Daniel Grassrope noted the counter-cultural significance of recognizing the sacredness of water in a broader society in which water has become a commodity. Grassrope declared, “Water is not a trademark or an accessory. It is a necessity and given of life.”

# The Next Generation and the Promised Land

Deuteronomy 31:1-8; Joshua 1:1-9

One of the most well-known stories of the Bible is that of the Exodus. It is an ancient narrative that continues to shape the faith stories of both Jews and Christians today as it is recounted through movies, sermons, Bible lessons, and sacred rituals. While much of the drama of the Exodus is enacted by humans, it is entwined with non-human creation. It is a story that is replete with rich imagery from nature. Its context is in the wilderness. The journey begins with the parting of a sea. Moses provides water by striking a rock. A pillar of cloud guides the people to a land that flows with milk and honey.

At one of the critical points in the drama of the Exodus, we find Moses standing on the edge of the Jordan River, just short of the Promised Land, saying to his young apprentice Joshua, “Be strong and bold. For you have been chosen to bring the people into the new land, not I.” Moses had seen God’s people out of Egypt and through a decades-long wilderness journey. Now, God had commissioned a leader from the next generation to guide them into a new land and a new life. The younger generations who were to settle in the new land would have very different lives than

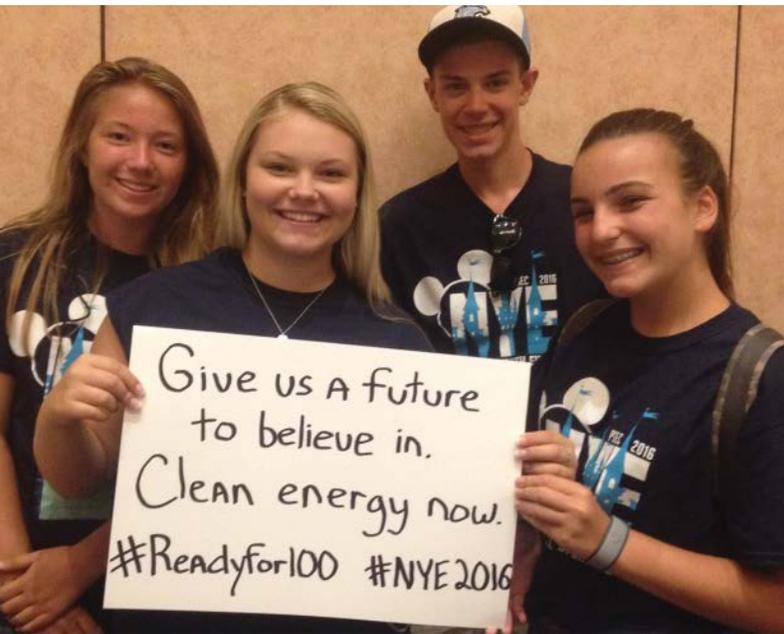


Youth plaintiffs for Juliana v. U.S. at rally. Photo credit: Robin Loznak

previous generations did in Egypt. Perhaps that is why God called Joshua: he had the energy, strength, and vision to lead the people into their new home and into a new life.

Reflecting on the story of Joshua and the urgency for us today to seek a Promised Land of abundance for all creation, Cynthia Coe notes: “Monumental change in the way we live takes energy and fresh ideas. As we look to new ways of using our earth’s resources and living our daily lives in radically different ways, we will need energetic leaders with fresh ideas... We will need new young leaders who are able to take on the big job of entering a new world of harmony with nature and make this new world sustainable for everyone.”<sup>7</sup>

*Reflect: What fresh ideas does the next generation have for helping to lead us into a Promised Land of abundance for all creation? Are the other generations listening? How are we empowering the next generation to share their creativity, energy, and vision?*



National Youth Event of the United Church of Christ.  
Photo credit: Brooks Berndt

# CHILDREN'S SERMON STARTER

**Preparation:** Lay out some tools at the front of the church for reference at the end of the sermon, such as a laptop or pencil and paper, a gardening trowel, seeds, plants, or reusable bags for groceries.

**Sermon:** Show children a bag of waste that you have collected from one day, including food waste, garbage, and recyclables. Lay out the individual items in the waste for the children to see (perhaps on a tablecloth or something to protect the floor), asking them: What can we do with this waste other than throwing it in a trash can? How about composting (taking food waste and leaves and turning them into things that our plants need)? Recycling? Ask the children to think about where these items usually end up if they are garbage (the landfill and into the earth, water, etc.), or if they are composted (into gardens), or if they are recycled (back into other products). Ask: Can you think of other ways that food or water or other things leave your house as waste? (Water in the shower, things that go down your sink drain or down the toilet.) Share an example of a child leading efforts in recycling or compost in your community, if available. Share the Exodus story (above) regarding how young people are often asked lead God's people into the Promised Land of abundance—a land in which all of God's creation flourishes. Ask the children: What ideas do *you* have for how to better care for God's creation? Do you see some tools before you that could help you to lead others into an abundant life for all creation?

## KIDS LEAD THE WAY AT CAMP

The reason Camp Stevens, an Episcopal camp in Southern California, started a recycling and compost program is because of young people. These young people saw a gap in opportunity and sustainability, developed the ideas into a system and a program, and then rallied the camp leadership to make it happen. Today, children collect chicken eggs, sift compost, plant and harvest produce, and eat camp out meals from re-used kitchen containers because of the courage and ingenuity of their peers!



Youth at SOIL Conference. Photo credit: Scott Hardin-Nieri

**“It is not enough, however, to think of different species merely as potential ‘resources’ to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves. Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost forever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.”**

—Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*

“A saved life is not simply being alive, a saved life is a life worth living. Yes, there is the chance that we will suffer, even die. It is even more likely that we will lose. But we have a choice. We can let our narcissism envelop us and not work for anything we don’t think we can fix, or we can join movements with passion rather than expectations, and give our all simply because that is our found purpose. When enough of us give our all to the same purpose, I know we can drive change. That is how we can save our lives.” —Kiran Oommen



Climate March 2017. Photo credit: Edward Kimmel



2017 Climate March in Washington, DC. Photo credit: Brooks Berndt

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, <https://laudatosi.com>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ourchildrenstrust.org/us/federal-lawsuit/>

<sup>3</sup> Melanie Oommen, *God’s Abiding Presence in the Prophetic Action of 21 Young People*, [http://www.ucc.org/god\\_s\\_abiding\\_presence\\_in\\_the\\_prophetic\\_action\\_21\\_young\\_people](http://www.ucc.org/god_s_abiding_presence_in_the_prophetic_action_21_young_people).

<sup>4</sup> A call has been made for sermons from adults and youths of all ages to be in solidarity with the youth of the lawsuit. To learn more about Justice for #EachGeneration, see <http://eachgeneration.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/news/new-generations-for-climate-justice>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/climate-justice/simulation-experience>

<sup>7</sup> Cynthia Coe, *Wild Faith*, Knoxville: Sycamore Grove, 2016, p. 101.



Creation Justice Ministries educates, equips, and mobilizes its 38 member communions and denominations, congregations, and individuals to do justice for God’s planet and God’s people. Learn more at [www.creationjustice.org](http://www.creationjustice.org)



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God’s work. Our hands.

We are a church that believes God is calling us into the world—together. We work through our

local congregations, synods, partners and church-wide ministries to protect, renew and restore God’s creation. Together, we achieve things on a scale and scope that we could never do otherwise. Visit [ELCA.org/environment](http://ELCA.org/environment) to find engaging resources, and consider joining from [ELCA.org/advocacy/signup](http://ELCA.org/advocacy/signup) the growing network of ELCA advocates voicing the importance of public policy that protects our vulnerable neighbors and God’s creation.

## LITURGY

*“We adore you, most holy Lord Jesus Christ, here and in your church, which is the world, and we bless you because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.”<sup>1</sup>*

### Call To Worship

Young and old and everyone in between—we envision a world where all live in harmony with each other and with God’s wonderful creation. We look forward to a time when Christ’s love permeates all that we say and do. We renew our commitment together, with God’s grace, to respect the gifts that have been given to us and to use those gifts for the good of the poor and vulnerable of this earth.

### Litany

**Leader:** Let us join our voices together as we present our prayers and gifts to the Lord.

**Children and Youth:** The children and youth of this congregation offer the gifts of our energy, our joy of life, and our vision for the future.

**All: Let us join with all creation and rejoice before the Lord.**

**Older members:** The elder members of this congregation offer the gifts of our wisdom, our patience, and our lessons learned from the past.

**All: Let us join with all creation and rejoice before the Lord.**

**All others:** The men and women, the parents, and the other members of this congregation offer the gifts of stability, our financial resources, and our hope for the future.

**All: Let us join with all creation and rejoice before the Lord.**

**Ministers:** The ministry leaders of this congregation offer the gifts of spiritual guidance, our prayers for sustenance in the midst of trials, and our encouragement to persevere.

**All: Let us join with all creation and rejoice before the Lord.**

**Leader:** Grant us insight for the challenges of this age and give us hearts full of hope and courage for the future. May we seek to leave the world in a state that all future generations will be able to enjoy—a creation that reflects the grace and love expressed by our risen Lord Jesus Christ.

**All: Amen.**



### Prayer of Confession

**Leader:** Gracious and merciful God, in your presence we confess our sins. Although Christ is risen from the grave and has shattered the power of death, we are still held captive by fear and doubt. We have neglected the poor and the hungry and ignored the cries of the oppressed. We pursue profits and pleasures that harm the land and pollute the waters, leaving this world depleted and damaged for future generations. Have mercy on us, O Lord. Help us to trust your power to change our lives and make us new, that we and all your creatures may know the joy of life abundant, given through Christ Jesus, the risen Lord. **Amen.**

### Statement of Assurance and Benediction

Loving God, through the death and resurrection of Christ you have made a way to heal the brokenness of this world. You have provided the energy and passion of youth to help care for creation. Fill the lives of this younger generation with the spirit of hope as they face the challenges and opportunities of the world before them. Grant them joy and peace in the midst of chaos and wasteful practices. Guide them with your presence as we journey together in faith and our shared mission to love and care for a hurting world. Renew in us a vision for creation that reflects your sacredness and glory. In all things, we pray in the precious name of our Lord, the Creator of all, Jesus Christ. Amen

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from “Earth Day, Easter and Our Responsibility Toward Creation,” by Stephen DeWitt, OFM, *Franciscan Friars Holy Name Province*, December 7, 2018.

# TAKE ACTION

## Write Letters

Invite members of your congregation to write a letter to a young person in their lives. Encourage them to express their commitment to addressing climate change, saving water, protecting species, and caring for God's creation. Read these letters in worship. Consider sending a copy to your elected members of Congress with a cover letter regarding your community's support of legislation that will protect the economic and ecological common good for today and for future generations. Send a copy of these letters to Creation Justice Ministries or to your church representatives.

## Make a Video

Gather the youth of your congregation to create a video or presentation urging others to take action. By expressing their thoughts and feelings on the current state of God's creation and their hopes for the future, youth can make a huge impact on their families and congregations as well as others in the community. Putting together a video or presentation also helps them internalize the material—helping them understand the issues before they try explain them to others.

## Plant a Tree

What better way to celebrate Earth Day than to plant a tree? You can plant a tree in your backyard or even organize a tree planting ceremony for the community surrounding your church. Allow the children/youth to plan and lead the ceremony. Not only will this allow opportunities to discuss the role of trees in our climate, but it will give congregations more opportunities to encourage stewardship of creation in their immediate locations.

## Send a Kid to Camp

At camps across the country, youth are learning to love and care for the earth through gardening and animal husbandry. By playing alongside chickens, feeding pigs compost, harvesting carrots for a campout meal, and collecting eggs for breakfast they inherently build relationships with the land and the Creator. These lessons carry on into adulthood.



Creation-themed arts camp at  
Community Reformed Church,  
Manhasset, NY.  
Photo credit: Lesley Mazzotta



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