

Prayers made Flesh: Inspiring Changed Attitudes towards Creation

by Rosemary Williams

When I was nine, my parents gave me a small garden plot near the house and an even smaller budget for purchasing seeds. I was thrilled. I spent many hours carefully selecting vegetables well-suited to that plot's shady spot, sprouting seeds in wet paper towels, growing them in egg crates, and at long last transplanting them outdoors. The morning after I so gingerly placed these precious plants in the soft soil, I awoke with twenty-three mosquito bites. This cooled my enthusiasm considerably, and I eventually killed every single plant in that garden. Ever since, I have been careful to label myself an "indoor person." As a Christian, I do of course care for the earth as God's creation, and I am careful to recycle and such, but my enacted concern for ecology mostly ends there.

In my first breakout session at the Institute of Sacred Music's Congregations Project, Anne Rowthorn, co-author of the forthcoming book *God's Good Earth: Praise and Prayer for Creation*, stated that "the greatest power is that we pray and that we pray on a regular basis because prayer changes minds." For me, this proved true: each day of the three-day conference was steeped in prayer. Some of these prayers were spoken, many were sung, and others were silent or embodied. By the end of the conference, I found myself far more concerned about the state of the environment than I had been before.

The prayers offered in worship at the beginning and end of each day were carefully balanced between joy and sorrow, praise and lament, as befits the conference theme: "As Creation Groans: Worshipping God on Holy Ground." Each morning began with a thirty-minute service that included songs, spoken prayers, and scripture readings. These services, curated by Marquand Chapel dean Maggi Dawn, reflected a wide breadth of Christian traditions while maintaining a considerable degree of depth. Music was drawn from across centuries and cultures, including some written for this very gathering. Art also focused our love and lament and offered a visual and tactile impetus to prayer. A beautiful maple dove-house in the middle of the worship space held a changing flock of carved birds, surrounded by ephemeral branches painted on the chapel floor in coffee grounds or myrrh. Spoken reflections from artist and theologian Ted Lyddon Hatten deepened our prayer at almost every service.

Even outside of these formal structured gatherings, prayer was the way of the conference. Many of the workshops, panels, and breakout sessions I attended included spoken prayers, sung prayers, or time for silent prayer. These, like the chapel sessions, included space for both praise and lament. We praised the Most High for having created such a wonderful order in the world: *heaven and Earth are full of Your glory*, we sang. We lamented to the Most Merciful for our corporate and individual neglect and misuse

of this very same order. *Forgive us, good and loving Lord, for we have done wrong and failed to do right.* And in these two extremes, which theologian Don Saliers described as forming the DNA of Christian life, we grappled with our own places in the created cosmos.

How, then, will these prayers shape our lives beyond this particular conference? As Anne Rowthorn stated, “prayer changes minds,” and the prayer at this conference has changed my own. After the conference, I visited my parent’s house and looked at the little plot where I had failed my garden so many years ago. All I could see were dirt and trash cans--apparently, neither of my parents could get anything to grow there, either. But I think it is time for me to try gardening again. I’m starting small, with just a few herbs, but (God willing) they will flourish and bloom and multiply. After that, I can encourage others to garden alongside me. And as we come together to pray and to tend the land, slowly, slowly, we may help to heal this beautiful land which our good God has so generously shared with us.