



## ***Witnesses of These Things: Ecumenical Engagement in a New Era***

2010 Centennial Ecumenical Gathering

and

General Assembly of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA and Church World Service  
New Orleans, Louisiana

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### **Studies 2010: Christian Understanding of Creation in an Age of Environmental Crisis**

**“For everything created by God is good...”**

1 Tim 4:4<sup>1</sup>

#### **Creation Care as Ecumenical Witness: Stewardship, Justice, and Redemption**

##### **Introduction**

Rain pours at Madison Christian Community Church in Wisconsin, nourishing a 6,000 square foot garden that the congregation tends. The flourishing ministry scatters seeds of hope for the congregation, incarcerated people and the surrounding low-income community. An ecumenical partnership between Advent Lutheran Church (ELCA) and Community of Hope (UCC), this joint congregation is a church that reflects the future.

With solar panels on the roof and a parking lot full of hybrid vehicles, the congregation has put into practice its call to care for God’s creation in significant and visible ways. The lawnmower is powered by vegetable oil and a labyrinth encourages congregants to connect to God’s land through walking meditation and prayer. Rainwater from the sanctuary’s roof fills four 300-gallon tanks from which water flows through underground tubing to the garden, where slow drip irrigation hoses snake through the vegetation. The vegetables not only nourish soul and body, but help build bridges across social and economic lines. The congregation partners with a nearby correctional facility, offering horticultural classes in their garden. Inmates sow the seeds for the garden and tend the seedlings as they grow. When ready for planting, the inmates deliver the seedlings to Madison Christian Community Church and spend a day tending the soil. The garden also provides produce for a nearby low-income community. “The garden ministry is one way to bridge the racial, economic and social barriers that exist between people today,” according to Rev. Jeff Wild, Pastor of Advent Lutheran Church. Members from the church welcome inmates with homemade baked goods as well as shade-grown, fair-trade coffee.

Congregations such as Madison Christian Community Church provide a glimpse into the future where congregations join together ecumenically not only to share worship space but to be in ministry with the community through creation care.

## **Part I: Religious Environmentalism Coming of Age**

With their moral authority and organized structures, religious organizations have played a key role in social change—from abolishing slavery to civil rights. When faith communities began focusing on environmental sustainability it was with a vigor birthed from a place of faith and hope. This moral conviction led a group of twelve theologians and practitioners to gather at the College of Preachers in Washington, DC, in September 2004 to deliberate on the theological foundations of the eco-justice work of the community of Christian communions which gathers as the National Council of Churches (NCC). This group, convened by the NCC Eco-Justice Program, included theologians such as Father John Chryssavgis, Bishop Thomas Hoyt, Dr. Carol Johnston, Dr. Larry Rasmussen and the Rev. Dr. Paul Santmire, who reflected upon the call to care for God’s creation as first outlined in Genesis and to care for “the least of these” as articulated in the gospel of Matthew (Mt 25:45). This fruitful gathering yielded *God’s Earth is Sacred: An Open Letter to Church and Society in the United States*, an ecumenical statement on the environment. “Our goal was to enhance the theological understanding of our work on behalf of God’s creation,” says Father Chris Bender, past co-chair of the Eco-Justice Working Group. “The aim was to embrace the sacred and to articulate a true vision of God’s creation-life on earth as ‘good’ and that we have a responsibility for it.”

The statement, released in 2004, provides insight into the theological underpinnings of eco-justice. The statement begins: “We rejoice in the splendor and mystery of countless species, our common creaturehood and the interdependence of all that God makes.” Declaring that “the people of God are called to forge ways of being human that enable socially just and ecologically sustainable communities to flourish for generations to come,” the statement calls churches to act in order to protect all of God’s creation. The theologians summarized the centrality of eco-justice in the life of the church today: “We believe that, in boundless love that hungers for justice, God in Jesus Christ acts to restore and redeem all creation... [‘eco-justice’] is not a competing ‘program alternative,’ one ‘issue’ among many. In this most critical moment in earth’s history, we are convinced that the central moral imperative of our time is the care for earth as God’s creation.”

The NCC works to fulfill this integrated ministry of creation care ecumenically through its Eco-Justice Program office and Eco-Justice Working Group. Central to the program’s success is its ability to bring various communions together, regardless of theology or institutional culture, to work on critical environmental issues. Most importantly, though, the program has ignited the passions of people of faith across the fabric of church life to join together in helping to restore right relationships with the rest of God’s creation. The program’s work, however, rests on the work of early Christian environmentalists, eco-theologians and on early Christians themselves.

## Eco-Theology: History and Context

The scriptures held sacred by Christians are replete with reference to the goodness of creation. A tradition of reverence for nature as the handiwork of God has persisted since early Christianity, before the age of environmentalism and the birth of eco-theology. Drawing from scripture, many Christians believed God was revealed in nature. Saint Augustine in the fifth century, as well as Meister Eckhart and Saint Thomas Aquinas almost a millennium later, proclaimed nature as a pathway to relationship with God. In the thirteenth century Francis of Assisi, often considered the patron saint of ecology, spoke of the elements of creation as siblings, members of an inter-related web of relationships, challenging Christian anthropocentrism and oft-held notions of hierarchy and dualism. The theology, practice, and spirituality of this Italian saint and his many followers worldwide is very much in harmony with the centuries-old tradition of Celtic Christianity. Throughout Christian history, numerous monastic communities have consciously sought to live in harmony and peace with creation. Drawing on these and other strains of thought and practice, eco-theology emerged as a theme in ecumenical discussions in the middle of the twentieth century.

Joseph Sittler, a professor of systematic theology at Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary, was one of the first theologians in the U.S. to base environmental ethics on Christian faith. In 1961, Sittler spoke of “cosmic redemption” in an address to the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in New Delhi, stating that all life, not just humans, were potential objects of God’s saving grace. His stewardship model was not anthropocentric, but driven by the responsibility to obey Christ in protecting creation. A student of Sittler, Richard Baer, took Sittler’s work a bit further and, drawing upon ecological sciences, discussed the interrelationships of God’s creation and the “web of life.”

The Faith-Man-Nature Group, which began within the National Council of Churches in 1963, took up the theological debates of the time and, as a group, aimed “to understand man’s relationship with nature in the light of religious faith and to spell out ethical imperatives for the conservation of natural resources.” Eco-theologian and member of the group, Paul Santmire connected environmental ethics to right relationships and social justice—not just in terms of human interaction but as it applies to the entire spectrum of life on earth. Similarly, John B. Cobb, Jr., a professor at the School of Theology in Claremont, extended his moral vision beyond humans and into biospheres and ecosystems. Feminist theologian at Vancouver School of Theology, Dr. Sallie McFague, brought to light the long lost “organic” tradition in Christianity in which the church, as the body of Christ, is a body firmly rooted in the earth. Her nonhierarchical theological worldview argued for the holiness of the earth.

Even with the body of eco-theological thought growing, no one was prepared for the theological storm unleashed when, in 1966, medieval historian Dr. Lynn Townsend White, Jr. gave a lecture entitled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” to the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Published a year later in *Science*, this controversial essay condemned Christianity as the cause of environmental degradation. It claimed that, because it emphasized human and divine transcendence over nature, Christianity “made it possible to exploit nature.” As White laid the blame for environmental degradation at the feet of the churches, scholars from various traditions took exception and produced a prolific litany of responses in opposition. Coupled with this increased attention to eco-theology, faith-based environmental movements found

institutional focus within the religious community and religious environmental organizations began to form. American religion had officially become environmentally aware, and eco-theology came of age.

Since then eco-theologians continue to expand the concept of eco-theology. Modern environmental theology, which began with the notion of human responsibility for nature—that humans have dominion but are mandated to care for the earth with respect and care—has stretched to include moral teachings about wealth and poverty, justice and oppression, temperance and greed. Concepts of interconnectedness and the “web of life” have matured and taken root. Eco-theologians have turned from a strict interpretation of creation care and focused on how economic justice, racism and gender justice are integrated with environmental problems. Theologians and practitioners have also begun to examine the underlying causes of environmental issues. “Water pollution, climate change, endangered species, and other environmental problems are a direct result of our lack of right relationship with God, with one another, and with the rest of creation,” says John Hill, of the General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church and co-chair of the Eco-Justice Working Group, which informs the work of Council on eco-justice issues. “Our society’s focus on materialism and consumerism renders our collective spirituality hollow, and ultimately leads to the degradation of all of God’s creation—human and nonhuman.”

Mainstream religious life embraces a broad spectrum of theology when it comes to God’s creation. Regardless of the theologies that Christians and their churches embrace, all share one desire: to care for all of God’s creation. “We are called to embody the love of Christ to all of creation,” says Hill.

## **Eco-Life and Work**

As theologians were grappling with ecological issues, churches were hard at work creating policies and programs to guide congregants in their environmental ministries. In the 1970s and 1980s, in order to create a foundation from which to work on environmental issues, many churches began developing policy statements and resolutions on eco-justice. Some, such as the American Baptist Churches in the USA, the Church of the Brethren, the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and The United Methodist Church, made general policy declarations on creation care and environmental stewardship, while others focused on specific topics such as climate change and energy. In 1983, the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver adopted a process which facilitated what came to be known as Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) and encouraged churches to work on these interrelated themes. In the late 1980s, at a consultation in Annecy, France, the WCC began to address a theology and ethic for the liberation of life that demands respect and protection of animals for their own sake.

In the aftermath of the Vancouver assembly Orthodox churches organized several inter-Orthodox meetings to address JPIC concerns. Throughout the years Orthodox leaders have delivered many strong and passionate statements on the environment. In 1989 the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios published an official decree on the environment, an encyclical letter sent out “to the pleroma of the Church.” He encouraged the faithful to walk gently on the earth. His successor, Patriarch Bartholomew, often called “the Green Patriarch,” has spoken out regularly on environmental issues, offering more than 130 addresses on the environment since 1991. An

Orthodox conference on the environment was held in Baltimore in 1995, sponsored by the Orthodox churches in North America and the National Council of Churches. It aimed to promote spiritual and practical commitment to God's creation, and it explored the relationship between Orthodox theology of priesthood and stewardship and the application of these principles in everyday life. In the late 1990s Patriarch Bartholomew declared pollution to be nothing less than a sin against God, and in October 2009, he convened the Eighth Religion, Science, and the Environment (RSE) symposium in New Orleans, Louisiana.

In June 1991, U.S. religious leaders gathered in New York for a Summit on the Environment and issued a statement that reflected the growing consensus about the importance of environmental issues in religious life. This statement helped launch the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, an organization that brings together Jewish and Christian organizations working on environmental issues.

During the past several decades, Christian religious groups have responded to the environmental crisis not only by crafting policy statements but also by producing programs, launching media campaigns, hosting gatherings, convening conferences and passing pro-environment policies within their own religious organizations. At the congregational level, many local faith groups have also increased their environmental activism by participating in adult education classes, worship services, energy efficiency projects and other environmental initiatives.

In 1984 member communions of the National Council of Churches formed the Eco-Justice Working Group and began working on issues such as acid rain and endangered species. Ecumenical gatherings such as the 1994 toxic tours and hearings in El Paso, TX, and the first national ecumenical conference for laity at Estes Park, CO in 1997 became the hallmark of the working group's efforts. The Working Group has been able to leverage limited staff resources and finances successfully. "Fellowship and relationship have been at the center of our work together," says Steve DeYoung of the Reformed Church in America, treasurer of the Eco-Justice Working Group: "With so many communions unable to fully staff an environmental office, working together has become essential."

In the 1990s mainline Protestant churches, such as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Methodist Church, and organizations such as the NCC, created environmental programs, while denominations developed policies promoting environmental stewardship. During the past two decades, Christian leaders in the U.S. became increasingly involved in environmental issues, forming organizations such as Earth Ministry and Interfaith Power and Light.

## **Resourcing Pews and Pulpit, People and Places**

The member communions of the NCC collaborate in creating a rich and varied set of resources. Each year, for example, the Eco-Justice Working Group produces an Earth Day Sunday worship resource which has covered issues such as energy, oceans, climate change and lands. Focusing on worship resources has been a key component to the work in this ecumenical eco-justice community. They help congregations to give praise and thanks for God's life-giving love, to celebrate and honor creation, to confess sins of environmental degradation, to re-energize commitment to environmental justice, and to express longing for healing of the earth and its people. These resources provide teachable moments—an opportunity to use hymns, prayers, sermons,

worship bulletin inserts and liturgies to enhance the congregation's appreciation for the Creator's works and to understand human responsibility for stewardship of creation.

The NCC has developed educational resources for all ages for both laity and clergy. These resources play a key role in motivating change in both behaviors and attitudes. Often these resources have led to further engagement by religious organizations and congregations. For instance, *Your Health and the Environment*, published by the NCC in 1997, inspired the NCC's current environmental health initiative which was launched in 2007.

The Council's Eco-Justice Program Office creates training opportunities to equip clergy and lay leaders for environmental ministries. A variety of religious groups and coalitions host special conferences and training events regionally and nationally. One such training program is the eco-justice young adult ecumenical training program held bi-annually in Port Isobel, Virginia. Held on a small, isolated island accessible only by boat, this training helps emerging faith leaders incorporate creation care into their ministries.

## **Greening Churches**

Congregations do not only teach through the curricula, training and worship they offer. They also educate through the 'hidden curriculum' embodied in the ways they construct and maintain their buildings and grounds. Such modeling of sustainable behavior has been a staple of eco-justice activity in recent years. Although many congregations have taken up the charge to 'green' their buildings through increased energy efficiency, other congregations are taking a more integrated ministry approach—combining social justice ministry with fiscal stewardship and environmental responsibility.

One such group is an interfaith coalition of more than 90 congregations working to green low-income housing in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement (HCCI) celebrated the recent opening of David and Joyce Dinkins Gardens, a new, green, affordable housing development. Nicknamed "The Dinkins," the 85-unit development features an environmentally friendly Green Grid Roofing system. The system reduces energy costs and urban "heat island" effects and provides sound insulation and storm water management. Rain water harvested from the roof will irrigate the property's landscaping and community garden and clean the sidewalks. Other green features include sun shading and an in-plank ventilation system.

"We will see great savings in water and sewer rates, which have gone through the roof in New York," said Ms. Lucille McEwen, Esq., President and Chief Executive Officer of HCCI. Not only will green innovations save money, they also reflect an active step toward environmental justice. "Green affordable housing is important for low-income residents, who suffer disproportionately from high energy costs and environment-related health issues, such as asthma and high blood lead levels," said Ms. Abby Jo Sigal, Vice President and Impact Market Leader of New York City Enterprise Community Partners, Inc., a project partner and non-profit provider of affordable housing.

## Greening Campuses

Nowhere are emerging Christian leaders striving to understand the call of the gospel more than in church-related colleges and theological schools which are seeking both to be agents of institutional change and to reform themselves as institutions. Courses and programs that integrate faith and ethics with environmental studies are being created to nurture pastors, church leaders and members who understand the power of religiously grounded environmental values. When students, faculty, administrators and staff work together to incorporate eco-justice concerns into institutional life, the institutions can serve as ‘laboratories’ for change. Their example, as well as their curricula, spreads the message of eco-justice among the churches and into the world.

## Stewardship

Stewardship has usually been understood, especially in Protestant Christianity, as the responsible use of time, talents and treasures on behalf of the mission of the church. Today, however, a more expansive understanding of stewardship is growing. For many congregations, stewardship now includes the prudent use of materials—water, energy, wood, chemicals used in lawn care and cleaning, and even coffee—in ways that embody responsibility to care for the earth and promote social justice.

One church in Stevens Point, WI, takes its stewardship call to the land. St. Paul’s United Methodist Church is restoring prairie land on its own five-acre site and teaching its congregation and community about environmental stewardship in the process. “Churches are big property owners,” said church member, Dr. Dennis Yockers. “It is important for us to be stewards of these resources by making sustainable land management choices.”

The church stopped cutting the lawn, and within six weeks native wildflowers and grasses popped up from the ground. Five years later, the land boasts 45 species of grasses and wildflowers, more than 15 different species of butterflies, and at least eight species of dragonflies. Three birdhouses welcome bluebirds, tree swallows and chickadees. Ground-dwellers include mice, ground squirrels and cottontail rabbits.

Now the prairie is a teaching tool for church members and for the community. Signs describe plants and prairie wildlife. Articles in the church newsletter teach members about the prairie seasons. A nearby public school uses the land to teach local ecology. The connection with the land people feel when walking the prairie has a spiritual component as well. “When you connect people’s spiritual lives with the land, the concept of stewardship becomes more meaningful,” said Yockers.

Another church in Manassas, VA, extends its understanding of stewardship to its role as an ‘eco-justice educator.’ Its elementary-age children meet weekly to learn about the role kids can play in caring for creation. Kids learn a recipe for compost, help plant seeds indoors and care for seedlings in the church garden over the summer. The children share the garden’s produce with local food pantries as well as older people in the church no longer able to care for a garden. Children recite a pledge at each meeting: “I pledge to: Learn more about the earth that God created; explore ways that I can be a better steward of the environment; help to make the world a better place; and teach others to do the same.”

“Always, our weekly lessons are connected to scripture, such as the creation story, various psalms or a parable,” said Krista Kimble, Manassas Church of the Brethren.

## **Environmental Justice**

“I don’t think that ‘eco-justice’ work should be separate from any of the other aspects of ecumenism and our ecclesiology,” said DeWayne Davis of The Episcopal Church (USA). “The church is about eco-justice since it is about the mission of the gospel. It needs to be understood as intrinsic to the theology and practice as much as any other Christian value and virtue: feed the poor, work for peace, care for creation, all of creation.”

Perhaps the most striking way that faith communities have joined social justice ministry with creation care is in the area of environmental justice. In 1987, the United Church of Christ (UCC) released a report that documented environmental injustices related to the location of toxic waste facilities based on race and socioeconomic class and coined the term ‘environmental racism’ to describe this disparity. In the fall of 1991, the UCC hosted the first environmental summit for people of color. This groundbreaking report and the ensuing summit, have become a cornerstone of the environmental justice movement in the United States.

In December 1992, the National Council of Churches hosted the Black Church Environmental Justice Summit. There was a follow-up gathering of black church leaders the next year.. Three years after the Summit, regional training events on environmental justice were held for black churches.

The Rev. Michael McClain personifies the environmental justice work of the council by reaching out to historic black churches, explaining the ways in which climate change is impacting people in poverty and people of color. Although climate change affects all people, a recent Congressional Black Caucus Foundation report found that climate change will disproportionately impact African Americans. McClain says this is news to many African American church leaders. Church leaders are responding to McClain’s warning call. “The black church has always moved for change,” said McClain. More than 150 African-American clergy have endorsed the Faith Principles on Global Warming developed by the NCC. McClain is empowering leaders for additional advocacy, helping them draft letters to congress and op-ed pieces for their local newspapers. “The church must speak to this issue,” said McClain. “It is Christ’s call to the church. We have a mandate from Christ to take care of those who can’t look out for themselves. If the church isn’t responding, who will?”

## **The Church and Climate Change**

Perhaps no other issue has galvanized the faithful like climate change. In 1999, the Interfaith Climate Change Campaign, an initiative developed by the Coalition on the Environmental and Jewish Life (COEJL) and the NCC, launched a series of statewide campaigns which took root in 21 states. These campaigns seeded a faith-based grassroots movement and network that resulted in strong education and advocacy. Many of the para-church organizations that witness today on environmental issues are a result of that campaign. In 2002, the U.S. Environmental Protection

Agency gave the Energy Star Award to the NCC and the COEJL for their interfaith climate education and outreach efforts.

First Grace United Methodist Church (UMC) of New Orleans, LA, is one congregation that is seeking ways to save energy and address climate change. “One of the most at-risk cities for the effects of global warming is New Orleans, and one of the biggest contributors is energy usage,” according to Sarah Fleming, one of the church volunteers. Fleming and three other live-in church volunteers received training and conducted energy audits at churches throughout the New Orleans area, finding at least \$2,000 in savings at each location. First Grace UMC now uses compact fluorescent light bulbs, has conservation reminders posted around the building and has made a variety of other energy-saving improvements.

## **Advocacy**

People of faith in all walks of life are becoming staunch advocates of eco-justice in the realm of public policy. For some, speaking on behalf of those whose needs are often overlooked—those living in poverty, future generations, nonhuman creation—has become an intrinsic part of their ministry.

Congregations provide information and materials to their members for writing letters to their legislators on eco-justice issues. Churches and local ecumenical organizations sponsor forums and other forms of public education to engage citizens in discussing and responding to environmental policy issues in their communities. Churches have national and regional advocacy offices and networks to reach policy makers, government officials, corporate executives and media with the message of justice and creation care.

## **Part II: Vision of the Future**

Despite the tremendous and varied creation care ministries conducted around the country and in spite of the number of programs and religious organizations addressing environmental issues, the readiness and willingness of congregational members to translate their faith into specific actions—whether political, community-based, or personal—varies greatly. It is in that spectrum of engagement and passion, that faith-based environmental activists and leaders in the eco-justice movement must learn to work. The focus needs to stay on equipping congregations to integrate environmental ministries into the existing fabric of their religious life. Additionally, it will become increasingly important to provide training and resources—educational and liturgical—to those clergy and laity who want to conduct environmental ministries.

In the next decade, because of the economic challenges facing many church institutions and a shift into a post-denominational Christian church, ecumenism will be even more important in the work to produce vibrant creation care ministries. As our lifestyles impact God’s creation, putting pressure on land, water, air and other gifts from God, it will become increasingly imperative to work together as more of a unified body in order to keep intact the community of life.”

Most importantly, perhaps, is the need for eco-justice not to become a “separate” program area of the church. Environmental problems and issues are by their very nature complex and

interconnected to social injustices such as poverty and racism. Only by tying environmental ministries to existing church ministries, will progress be made on any social justice front. “The goal of living life together as church and as responsible stewards of the environment are intertwined,” said Leslie Woods, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) “Achieving a corporate life of Christ together will not be possible without also addressing how our corporate life impacts creation.”

A group of faith representatives recently gathered in Annapolis, MD, to discuss the future vision of creation care and environmental ministries. The group, which contained representatives from the Orthodox, Anglican, mainline Protestant and historic peace church traditions, commented on the need to enhance further the theological understanding of creation care and to link churches together in their work on environmental issues. It was clear in the discussion that connections to poverty and social justice were a pivotal part of their future vision.

“Caring for creation is vital to the life and ministry of the NCC and its member communions because of the greatest commandment to love both God and neighbor,” commented Greg Larzakovitz of the Church of the Brethren.

Father Christopher Bender, Greek Orthodox priest and former co-chair of the council’s Eco-Justice Working Group stated, “We need to strengthen our international ties and our understanding that God created one earth, bound in community, one to another.”

As the group met, the vision of a restored and redeemed creation took root. “When communions prioritize environmental justice internally, engaging congregations and promoting broader public witness, the so-called wall of environmental justice as a political issue will erode, and genuine whole society action and transformation may take place,” said Larzakovitz.

It is clear that speaking to those in the pews in a way that resonates is a key priority for creation care work. As clergy and laity continue to work on creation care issues, it is imperative that they communicate that creation care is a central part of being church—of caring for our neighbor. This message of creation care should contain a clearer enumeration of the relationship between other injustices and forms of liberation.

“We need to be a voice for the most vulnerable and those who will be most affected by environmental degradation,” said Mari Castellanos, United Church of Christ. “We need to de-politicize environmental issues and give a moral imperative to earth care.”

Inherent in that moral call is the desire to address current lifestyle trends. “As people of faith we can help Christian communities further understand the ties between environment and justice and personal lifestyles,” said Mike Schut, Episcopal Church. “As Christians, we need to practice, model and embody a way of life more fulfilling, whole and joyful than that which is sold to us by our culture. We should preach a life that is instead based on healed relationships, community and love.”

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1. *Note: Unless otherwise noted, scripture references are taken from Bruce Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds., The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); also cited as NRSV. When noted, scripture passages are taken from Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., The New Oxford Annotated Bible: Revised Standard Version Containing the Old and New Testaments, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); also cited as RSV.*