

Lent Green Tips

From Carol Gilbertson, Creation Care Team, First Lutheran, Decorah

GREEN TIP FOR LENT: Break Free from Single-Use Plastics.

First Lutheran's Creation Care Team suggests that congregation members and their families work to **avoid single-use plastic for the 40 days of Lent**. In the AfterWord each week during Lent, we will include specific tips toward achieving this goal.

First, a Request: Do you have a surplus of reusable shopping bags? The Creation Care team is collecting extra bags to be available to those who need them. Please bring extra newly-laundered bags to the church Fellowship Hall and deposit them in the bin provided.

Second, the Background: Prompted by synod resolutions and by the group Lutherans Restoring Creation, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly last year committed to seriously work for restoration of God's earth, encouraging and equipping individual congregations to reduce harmful consumption habits. In response, the church's young adults proposed a Lenten relinquishing, the #NoplasticsforLent initiative, calling us to pray for creation, "to lament the ways we have been complicit in the degradation of the earth, and to act to care for our neighbor in fasting from the things that are hurting our planet."

Third, the Plastic Problem: Many of us are really disciplined about collecting recyclables and taking them to recycling receptacles. But in fact 91 percent of all plastic isn't recycled at all. Single-use plastics in particular—thin plastic bags and small items like plastic straws, bags, and cutlery—are hard to recycle and often are not accepted by recycling centers. We produce 300 million tons of plastic each year worldwide, half of which is for single-use items: plastic packaging, beverage bottles, produce bags, shipping envelopes, and customer shopping bags.

Although plastic was invented in the nineteenth century, production and use of plastics—as a cheap and adaptable substance which can be either soft and pliable or hard and durable—has exploded and revolutionized modern life since the 1970s. Plastic is produced from the earth's organic materials (mostly crude oil). The problem is that plastic is a nearly permanent substance. Bacteria normally cause decomposition or biodegradation, but plastic contains chemicals that bacteria cannot eat. Theoretically, plastic could decompose, but it would take up to 450 years and only if it's exposed to the sun. Landfills typically cover each day's deposited waste with a layer of soil, so landfill plastics are exposed to the sun so briefly that they cannot break down.

Plastics that do break down simply become smaller and smaller pieces, called microplastics or nanoplastics, which end up in rivers and streams and eventually in the ocean, causing serious damage to marine animals and seabirds; when animals eat plastic, thinking it is food, it gets tangled up in their digestive system and often causes death. Every 45 seconds, a garbage truck's worth of plastic waste is deposited in our oceans-- killing over 1 million marine animals every year. Much of this plastic from the past and into the present ends up in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch in the North Pacific Ocean, made up of large plastic items (such plastic things as lighters, toothbrushes and pens, water bottles, baby bottles, and cell phones) and microplastics. This large patch of trash spans 620 square miles. And research suggests that it has increased ten-fold each decade since 1945.

Such a huge problem needs political action by governments on a large scale—and a couple of bills have been introduced in the US Congress—Break Free from Single-Use Plastics Act (2020 and 2021) and the Protecting Communities from Plastics Act (2022)—but neither has yet passed. But we as consumers are a crucial part of the problem, and we as individuals can do a lot to highlight and reduce the problem. As Christians, we believe it is our divine charge to steward—protect and preserve—God’s Creation for the future of living things.

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GREEN TIP: Use reusable shopping bags. Make them handy: store several in your car, purse, briefcase, bike bag, and/or backpack so that you have some available even for impromptu shopping (some fold up very small inside their own pocket bag). Use reusable bags for all purchases, not only for groceries. And be sure to bring your own reusable bags to Decorah’s wonderful Farmers’ Market!

The easiest reusable shopping bags to clean are cloth bags, which are for sale at most grocery stores and kitchen shops, and which are often given as rewards for donations to non-profit charities. Another option is polypropylene bags—they are essentially plastic, but much longer lasting than single use plastic, and often they are woven, resemble cloth fabric, and can be easily laundered.

NOTE: If you have more cloth shopping bags than you can use, the Creation Care Team is asking you to **donate them** (freshly laundered) to the Creation Care Bag Box (in the southwest corner of the Fellowship Hall). If you are not used to using cloth shopping bags, please try it! If you don’t have any or don’t have enough, **please feel free to take some** for your use from the Fellowship Hall Creation Care Bag Box.

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Green Tip: Invest in a reusable water bottle, preferably one that is not plastic; many models are silicone, aluminum, or stainless steel (sometimes double-walled for insulation). Most individual thin-plastic bottles of water are not recyclable and are simply put in the trash, ending up in landfills. Americans purchase around 50 billion of these bottles every year, which amounts to about 151 per person! Estimates are that over a million plastic water bottles are sold worldwide every minute. In 2021, a total of 583 billion plastic water bottles were used and discarded.

The reasons many people purchase water in plastic bottles includes taste preference for spring water or alkaline water, concern about public water safety, hygienic concerns, and convenience. But there are alternatives for getting purified tap water to drink, including installing purifiers under the sink or purchasing whole house water purification systems. Some grocery stores have dispensers for putting purified water into a reusable container. One of the most economical solutions is to purchase an inexpensive portable water purifier—either a pitcher or a larger dispenser, both of which use replaceable filters—available at most department and discount stores.

Decorah water is regularly tested for contaminants, and the most recent report for 2021 is clear that any contaminants in our water are all within safe limits. So, if you are not averse to tap

water, all the better! You can refill your reusable bottle whenever you are near a faucet or a water fountain.

Related tip: Buy any soft-drinks in recyclable cans rather than plastic bottles. When you purchase something with a plastic lid, be sure to recycle that lid.

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GREEN TIP: Use reusable containers to avoid purchasing single-use plastics. Produce bags provided by stores for selecting your own kind and quality of fruits and vegetables (some stores have the option of paper bags) and other bulk shopping make up much of the single-use plastic we take home from the grocery store. Many of these bags hold vegetables and fruit and are still clean when we have eaten the produce. If they are clean but still slightly wet from the produce, turn them inside-out to dry. Our suggestion is to keep a receptacle in your kitchen to place them in and make these single-use plastic bags *reusable* by bringing your supply with you when you shop for groceries. You can also do this with the twist-ties we all acquire. Consider using one of your cloth bags as the “**supply**” bag where you keep these produce bags, twist-ties, and reusable bottles and jars for bulk purchases. By doing this, you don’t reduce one-use plastic completely, but at least you make it serve a longer purpose, and you reduce the number of them used at the grocery store.

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GREEN TIP 1: Avoid Single-Use Plastic To-Go Containers. Because many recycling centers do not take polystyrene (Styrofoam), most restaurants have stopped using it for coffee cups, pickup meals, or restaurant meal leftovers. Many restaurants have begun using cardboard to-go containers, which could be recycled but are often too soiled by the food in them to be recyclable. Some now use single-use plastic, which we are trying to avoid. A good alternative to “doggy bags” is to stick your own non-disposable storage containers in a tote bag to bring with you to restaurants for your left-overs. Encourage your family and friends to do the same.

GREEN TIP 2: If you or someone you love is a smoker, **quit smoking** yourself and **urge others to quit**. What does this have to do with single-use plastic? Cigarette filters are made from plastic fibers (cellulose acetate) and the UN estimates them to constitute the most discarded item worldwide, about 4.5 tons each year. Cigarette butts discarded on streets and other places often move through storm water systems and eventually end up on beaches, where birds and sea creatures mistake them for small minnows and eat them. Filters also leach dangerous chemicals: studies have shown that one cigarette butt (filter) dropped into one liter of water killed half the fish in it.

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GREEN TIP: Avoid single-use plastic in the bathroom, laundry, and kitchen. Do an audit of the plastic in these locations in your house. What sustainable swaps could you make? Think of the huge laundry detergent jugs, which are considered recyclable but are often not actually recycled. **Laundry detergent sheets** are relatively economical, very easy to use, are easily divisible for smaller loads, and come in recyclable cardboard containers, so they leave no waste. **Wool dryer balls** are sustainable, very effective, and can last years, reducing our need for purchased dryer sheets.

In the bathroom: Buying **replacement supplies of hand soap** reduces the number of plastic bottles we purchase, but even more sustainable is to consider purchasing **hand soap bars**, as well as **shampoo and conditioner** bars, which eliminate plastic containers and also come in recyclable paper wrapping. Bar soaps involve up to 20 times less packaging, and since liquid soaps often consist of 50 percent or more water, you are getting more actual soap for your money. Toothbrushes usually have plastic handles. Because they are used over time, they are not single-use, but you can avoid plastic altogether with **bamboo toothbrushes**. Not only do they save you from plastic, bamboo is antimicrobial: its natural chemical properties prevent bacteria from growing. As a result, your toothbrush handle will be more hygienic than plastic. Another issue: **plastic micro-beads in personal care products**, especially facial scrubs and toothpaste; when you rinse them down the drain, they enter the water system. Avoid them to keep micro-plastics out of our water but also to avoid injury to your eyes. Note: Congress passed the Micro-Bead Free Waters Act in 2015 to prohibit the production and sale of products containing plastic micro-beads, but state rules vary, and they still occasionally appear.

In the kitchen: Consider **dish washing soap in bar** rather than liquid form, although some stores also sell **bulk liquid dish soap**, which you dispense into your own container, so you avoid the proliferation of plastic bottles. Also consider using **bamboo cutting boards**, rather than wood or plastic. Bamboo is a fast-growing, sustainable fiber, inexpensive, and—like some woods—naturally antimicrobial. If you regularly pack lunches for yourself or your children, use heavy plastic containers rather than thin plastic sandwich bags.

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GREEN TIP: Think about what you put in the trash. It's crucial that each of us develops the habit of stopping to think each time we dispose of something. If the item is single-use plastic, let's ask ourselves how we might have avoided getting it in the first place. If it's something else, let's ask ourselves if it would be recyclable. If yes, transfer it to a recycling receptacle. Is this something that can be repaired and reused? Is this something that could be used by someone else? If yes, sell it (for example, to the Get-Up), donate it (Depot, Goodwill) or give it away (join the Facebook group Buy Nothing Winneshiek County, IA) or gift it to someone you know who can use it. Let's try to remember that whatever we place in our home garbage is destined for the landfill.

Sanitary landfills are a necessary but not ideal solution to the problem of waste. They are scientifically engineered facilities constructed in the ground and designed to hold and isolate waste from the environment. Federal and state regulations govern the location, design, and operation of landfills in order to protect human health and the environment. We put our garbage into the ground. Each landfill takes space away from other uses—it cannot be used for agriculture, housing, or nature recreation. Its size is finite: think of the landfill as an underground permanent garbage bin that is never opened or dumped. When it is full, the county needs to develop a new site. Although regulation landfills are designed to prevent any leaking, some landfills can still leach toxic chemicals into ground or surface water. As any biodegradable organic waste decomposes (wherever it is), it naturally releases methane, a potent greenhouse gas that absorbs heat and is a major contributor to climate change.

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GREEN TIP: Push for government policies to eliminate wasteful single-use plastics. Talk to friends, family, and church members about your climate action and encourage them to help. An earlier Green Tip crucially asked you to be a climate voter. But we can still work for climate improvement between elections. One way is to go to the websites of environmental watchdog groups (non-governmental organizations), such as Environment Iowa, Nature Conservancy, Sierra Club, Inside Climate News, Greenpeace, Environmental Defense Fund, Citizens Climate Lobby, World Wildlife Federation, and others. There are also very good religious organizations, such as Lutherans Restoring Creation, Green the Church, and Interfaith Power and Light (which has an Iowa chapter). Join, sign up to receive their emails, and, if you can, donate. These groups lobby government bodies, corporations, and other entities at state and local levels, and they often send out emails asking for support—signing petitions, writing letters to legislators, and/or donating to give them support. (For example, Public Interest Research Group [PIRG.org], which works more generally for the public’s health, safety, and well-being, is right now conducting a campaign to get Amazon “to move beyond wasteful single-use plastic packaging”; their website asks you to sign their collective message to the company.)

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No additional Green Tips this week. Now that we’ve lived through our Lenten devotion and had the joyous celebration of Christ’s resurrection last Sunday, let’s all stop to consider how our plastic-free Lent affected our lives and our perspectives. Did fasting from plastic help you understand more deeply how completely our lives are tied to plastic? Did it help you to consider our stewardship of God’s Creation in a new light? What particular choices did you make that helped you most in your quest to become more intentional about your use of single-use plastic? Which choices will you continue in your ongoing life?

Bring your thoughts and conclusions about this to an Earth Day Fair, a second Sunday discussion with Pastor Mike and the Creation Care Team in the Fellowship Hall this Sunday, April 16. We’re eager to hear your responses!

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GREEN TIP: Buy local and in season. In Decorah summer, we have a marvelous Farmer’s Market with an impressive array of local, nutritious fruits, vegetables, and flowers (also baked goods). But in Iowa winters, buying in-season means eating lots of root vegetables (potatoes, carrots, beets, parsnips, etc.), apples, and squashes. Avoiding off-season produce is harder for us consumers now that we have so many tempting choices of non-local fruits and vegetables that are shipped to our grocery stores. But these non-local products have an environmental cost: in North America, fruits and vegetables travel an average of 1,500 miles before reaching your plate, and that results in carbon emissions. Buying fresh, local food eliminates the long distances traveled and preserves nutrients and flavor. Luckily, we have some local producers who have been growing such things as fresh greens indoors in winter (see the Iowa Food Hub at <https://iowa-food-hub.myshopify.com>). And we also can choose frozen fruits and vegetables, which were picked in season when ripe and thus are actually tastier than the fresh ones we buy out of season; frozen produce may even contain higher levels of vitamin C. We can also buy dried fruits and berries, which are as nutritious as fresh ones: one piece of dried fruit contains about the same quantity of nutrients as the fresh fruit—by weight, it contains 3.5 times the fiber, vitamins, and minerals as fresh, though it’s important to remember that each piece is much

smaller than a comparable fresh fruit. When you buy produce, pay attention to where the food was grown and produced—the closer to us, the better for the environment and often, for the fresh deliciousness of the food.

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Green Tip: Use cold water. When doing laundry, select cold water, which can save up to 80 percent of the energy required to wash clothes. Cold water is actually more effective in removing stains, while hot water pushes them deeper into the fabric. Choose a low machine setting to save water, and, as much as possible, use laundry clotheslines (outside, in right seasons, or in basements) and drying racks instead of automatic dryers.

Use cold tap water as much as possible when cleaning. You will need hot water for washing dishes and disinfecting bathrooms, but cold water works very well with abrasive cleaners on sinks, toilets, and tubs.

Conserve water as much as possible. Use cold water when washing produce for eating—one way of saving water: lower your produce (in a colander) into a bowl of cold water and swirl it around before draining, as lettuce drainers do; this uses much less water than spraying the produce with a running faucet. Avoid running any faucets for more than a few minutes.