



Wissahickon Creek outside Philadelphia, Pa. The first Brethren in America were baptized in these waters.

Down by the river

DEVELOPING A BRETHREN ECOLOGICAL IDENTITY

by William L. Miller

Rivers hold special significance in the life and history of the Church of the Brethren. Baptismal waters represent the spiritual identity of our church. We wade into these waters to commune with the Creator, and when we emerge we enter the fellowship of believers. We join with those who wait on the banks, those who went before us, and those who will wade into the waters after us. It is through the ordinance of baptism that we seek to restore right relationship with each other and with God. Rivers truly are our lifeblood.

Many of us have fond memories of

the rivers where we were baptized. For me, it is the Bermudian Creek, a creek I have known my whole life. The Bermudian flows through my family's small farm, located in the rolling hills of northern Adams County, Pa. My church is located several miles downstream.

Our congregation's baptistry is a small pool next to a rock outcropping in the middle of the creek. Immediately downstream, the creek passes through a series of shallow riffles as it carves its way through steep sandstone banks. Looking up from the water, you can make out a wooden cross on the top of the steep banks. It is at this point where

congregants gather to watch the trine immersion of their brothers and sisters, eagerly waiting to welcome them into the covenantal community.

I find the ordinance of baptism so special because it establishes a sense of place and connection. When I was baptized on a cold spring morning, I was overwhelmed by the grace and serenity of the moment and the goodness of creation. The cathedral of oaks and maples arching over the stream have likely witnessed most, if not all, of the baptisms since the establishment of our congregation. They record the history of the land by faithfully transcribing new

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Urban Waters Learning Network

Sediment in Plaster Creek, Grand Rapids, Mich.

growth rings each year.

A keen eye may notice the presence of other observers—mourning doves—moving through the tree canopies. My mind is drawn to Matthew 3:16: “And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove. . . .”

For the Brethren, baptismal waters provide glimpses of shalom—of peace, of wholeness, and of right relationships between creatures and *Elohim*, Creator God. They provide a vision of the Garden of Eden.

Rivers also represent the ecological identity of the Brethren. In its most basic sense, the study of ecology explores the web of relationships among creatures, both human and non-human, and between creatures and their environment. Rivers nourish the land, give drink to the beasts of the field, and provide refuge to the birds of the air (Psalm 104:10-13).

A Christian view of ecology recognizes the relationship between the Creator and the creation. The creation gives its testimony to the goodness

and sovereignty of Creator God (Romans 1:20).

An ecological understanding also leads us to recognize the far-reaching consequences of human sin. Sin is antithetical to shalom and corrupts the goodness intended in creation.

I now live on the banks of a small river considered to be the most polluted waterway in western Michigan. It was not always that way. The first residents of this watershed were the Odaawaan people, who called this creek *Kee-No-Shay*, meaning “water of the walleyed pike”—an ecological name reflecting the relationship between the residents of the waters and its banks.

Colonists would give this river a new name, Plaster Creek, reflecting a relationship based on exploitation rather than shalom. The name refers to the gypsum deposits that were wantonly scoured from the banks of the creek to make plaster. The resulting pollution and urbanization eliminated the walleye and drove the Odaawaan people from its banks. *Kee-No-Shay* joined the painful groans of a sick creation (Romans 8:20-22).

The consequences of environmental degradation reach far beyond the health of the creatures in God’s rivers. The health of these waters is intricately linked to human flourishing.

Two years ago, I took my college biology class on a tour of the watershed. We followed a small tributary of Plaster Creek from headwaters to confluence. The channel of this tributary is boxed into an underground culvert as it runs through an affluent suburb—an attempt to minimize flood damage to homes that were built too close to the creek. We followed the stream as it flowed underground for four miles until finally it emerged in a lower-income neighborhood near downtown Grand Rapids. The water spilling out of the culvert was coated in an iridescent sheen, a sign of a sick stream. The air was fouled with the pungent odor of oil. Bacterial loads were high.

Sin not only corrupts our spiritual lives but breaks our ecological identity. Baptisms can no longer be safely performed in Plaster Creek.

As we mourn the sickness of creation and lament the loss of God’s majestic rivers, however, it is important to remember the good news of the gospel. The gospel message is a message of hope, not just for our spiritual redemption, but for the redemption of all creation (Colossians 1:20). Creation eagerly anticipates its freedom from the bondage of sin and decay (Romans 8:21), and the fulfillment of God’s promise to restore all things (Revelation 21:5).

I think back to the Bermudian Creek and wonder what my baptismal waters will look like once restored to their full glory. And as I walk along the eroded banks of Plaster Creek, I wait in eager anticipation for the



Eder River in Germany

return of the walleye. God provides us with a glimpse of what *Kee-No-Shay* may look like in the coming Kingdom in Revelation 22:1-3:

Then an angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as a crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. . . .

Just as we are to go out and baptize members of all nations in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18-20), so too are

we tasked with being agents of renewal for all creation (Mark 16:15). We are called to be caretakers of God’s good creation (Genesis 2:15) and restore shalom where it has been lost.


We can draw inspiration from the banks of *Kee-No-Shay*, where there is a movement toward renewal. My colleague Dave Warners affectionately refers to this movement as *reconciliation ecology*. Over the past decade, he has helped form and lead a community-based effort, called the Plaster Creek Stewards, to restore shalom to the waters. This group engages local churches, schools, neighborhoods, and businesses to restore health and beauty to the river.

Through their efforts, *Kee-No-Shay*

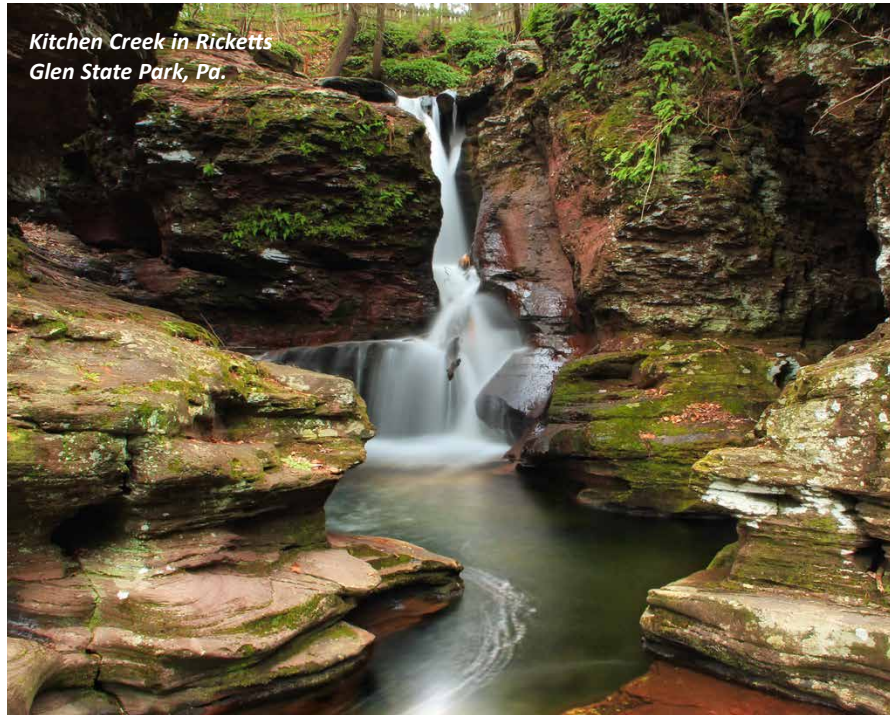
is showing improvements. Just this past year, beaver have returned. The ribbed sedge, a rare plant found in only nine Michigan counties, was discovered along the creekbanks. This new life provides hope that baptisms may one day be possible in *Kee-No-Shay*.

I believe there is a reason that God told Adam to name all living creatures (Genesis 2:19). It is impossible to fully value the creation if we do not know it. Thus, the first step of guardianship comes with developing fellowship. Make it a regular habit to spend time on the banks of whatever river you call home. Explore your ecological identity and connections. Learn the names of the creatures that provide testament to God’s sovereignty (Job 12:7-10).

With knowledge comes empathy, with empathy comes compassion, and with compassion comes responsibility. Individually or as a congregation, seek out and partner with organizations to steward local rivers. Plan a river clean-up Sunday. Install rain gardens to reduce runoff and pollution.

Baptism is an expression of Christ’s restorative grace in our lives, and water is an instrument of healing and salvation. Let us reciprocate and extend Christ’s grace and peace to the entirety of creation through restoration and care of the rivers we call home. 

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Kitchen Creek in Ricketts Glen State Park, Pa.