

Foreword

Thank you. Thank you for picking up this book and for reading it and for letting it influence you. Thanks for opening your mind to some new ideas, and then letting those new ideas influence the way you live, and then letting your changing way of life influence others in your circle of family and friends. Thank you.

Thank you for doing something good for yourself because your life will be more full and wise having learned from Scott Sabin in these pages. In return for the time you invest in this book, you will gain freedom from the ignorance and misinformation that cloud the thinking and inhibit the constructive action of so many people, including many sincere Christians. After reading this very readable book with its powerful storytelling and its accessible survey of best practices in creation care, for the rest of your life you will see a bigger picture than you've ever seen before when it comes to matters of human poverty, health, prosperity, and security.

Thanks for enriching your spiritual development, because when we understand ourselves as God's creatures woven into the fabric of God's world, we take our proper place in the big scheme of things, which brings blessing to us and to all whose lives we touch.

Thank you for doing something good for the world. The world needs us—you and me and millions more of us—to have a change in mind and heart about our relationship to the beautiful planet to which we have been given by God as caretakers, and which has been given to us for enjoyment and in stewardship. By reading this book, you will render yourself more vulnerable to that kind of change in mind and heart.

Contents

Introduction: Lost Among the Forgotten	xi
CHAPTER 1: Discovering God's Heart for the World	1
STEP ASIDE WITH MARK LABBERTON	
Justice as an Act of Worship	5
CHAPTER 2: A Vicious Cycle	10
CHAPTER 3: Reversing the Cycle	22
STEP ASIDE WITH ROBERT LINTHICUM	
Empowerment and Transformation	27
CHAPTER 4: Sustainable Agriculture and Forestry	34
STEP ASIDE WITH CALVIN DEWITT	
The Good Steward	38
CHAPTER 5: Creating Enterprise	47
CHAPTER 6: Sharing the Gospel	60
STEP ASIDE WITH TONY CAMPOLO	
Creation Care and Worship	64
CHAPTER 7: The Global View	73
STEP ASIDE WITH JOANNE LYON	
Climate Change	76
STEP ASIDE WITH PAUL ROBINSON	
The Death of a Way of Life	80

CHAPTER 8:	In Our Own Backyards	87
	STEP ASIDE WITH MATTHEW SLEETH	
	A Broken Promise	90
	STEP ASIDE WITH LEROY BARBER	
	We Shall Overcome	94
CHAPTER 9:	Creation Care: The Time Has Come	97
	STEP ASIDE WITH TOM THERIAULT	
	The Creation Care Adventure	100
	STEP ASIDE WITH TRI ROBINSON	
	Becoming a Creation Care Congregation	106
CHAPTER 10:	Getting into the Game	112
	STEP ASIDE WITH RUSTY PRITCHARD	
	Creation Care Has to Be Fun	117
Notes		125
Appendix: Creation Care Bible Study		135

Introduction

As rain swept across the canyon toward the jagged ridge where Eldon Garcia and I stood, I felt a long way from home. We were lost somewhere in the hills of southern Haiti—and our truck was nearly out of gas.

We had no choice but to return to Port-au-Prince. But as I looked at the nameless mountains surrounding us and the muddy ruts departing in several directions, I wondered: Where is Port-au-Prince?

I was the new acting director of Floresta USA, (now Plant With Purpose, although many of our field partners retain the Floresta name) a small Christian relief and development agency working in partnership with its Dominican counterpart, which Eldon directed. Eldon and I were exploring a possible collaboration with an Episcopal priest working in the mountains south of Port-au-Prince. It was early 1995, a few months after the U.S. invasion. Although I was interested in visiting Haiti, I wasn't all that excited about working there. Among its many disparaging titles, Haiti is known as the graveyard of good intentions.

However, Floresta Dominican Republic has an office in Santo Domingo, just across the island, and Eldon thought it would be simple enough to drive to Port-au-Prince. Once there, we would meet the woman facilitating the connection and follow her party to the mountains where Pere Wilfrid Albert, the priest, lived.

I had been working for Plant With Purpose for almost two years, drawn there by my interest in helping the poor and the fact that the organization was located in my hometown. I didn't have

any particular interest in reforestation or the environment; in fact, I saw those things as a bit of a distraction. When people I met said, “Oh, that’s the organization that plants the trees,” I became annoyed, wanting to reply, “No, we are the organization that feeds the poor.”

Of course, I had heard the story of how Plant With Purpose was created to address deforestation, a root cause of poverty. I could even repeat it and sound convincing. But I wasn’t sure I fully believed it. Still, this job was temporary. I was only here to get some experience before applying for a job with a more established agency.

After Eldon and I crossed the border into Haiti, it felt like we were driving on the moon. The landscape was empty, stark, and utterly foreign. Haiti’s largest lake, Étang Saumâtre, glistened a brilliant blue on our right. On the left, wasted brown mountains rose ominously. Occasionally we passed small quarries of white rock, full of workers wielding picks.

Since red tape at the border had made us nearly a day late, we had to change our plans. Rather than meeting our contacts in Port-au-Prince and accompanying them into the mountains south of Leogane, we would have to make our way into the mountains on our own. We were told to ask for directions from the staff of the Episcopal hospital in Leogane.

As we approached Port-au-Prince, the ramshackle homes became closer together, road conditions got worse, and traffic slowed. We soon found ourselves in a stream of brightly painted pickup trucks and buses packed with people. These buses, known as “tap taps,” are typical public transport in Haiti.

Suddenly, Port-au-Prince loomed all around us. It looked as if the tide had come in over the cinderblock-and-iron architecture and stranded garbage and rubble on every horizontal surface. Human beings spilled out onto the broken streets, in every sort of dress imaginable. A naked man walked past a gentleman in a pin-striped suit, who was picking his way through the debris. People filled each alley and turned every sidewalk into an impromptu market. Rotting fruit and raw sewage odors combined with the

smell of frying meat and exhaust. UN convoys of white SUVs and armored personnel carriers passed frequently.

At the port we turned south to follow the water. We got lost at one point and stopped to ask directions at a market situated on top of a heap of mango peels. The directions were incomprehensible, but we continued on National One, heading south, then west through the seemingly endless traffic jam of Carrefour.

Waiting for the traffic to move, we witnessed hundreds of mini-dramas. A truck, open in the back, sat in front of us, packed with market women sitting on bags of charcoal and rice. To the right, a small boy maneuvered a marionette deftly over the broken sidewalk. Further on, a broken pipe spilled into the gutter, providing an opportunity for women to do their laundry, while children crowded around, filling pails and jugs to take home.

Traffic ground to a halt again. Dozens of tap taps sat in the sweltering heat, jammed with solemn, sweating faces, while a pedestrian tide of incredible variety passed by them.

Finally, the congestion of the city thinned. We passed palm-thatched restaurants and small, ruined resorts. In the brilliant bay, wooden fishing boats created a picturesque backdrop. The tranquility and timelessness of the scene seemed incongruous with the nightmare of the previous months. I wondered how many of these fishermen had been tempted to participate in the recent exodus when, according to the news, anything that would float was pressed into service to escape the island.

The road became increasingly rutted. For several miles we moved at a painful crawl, weaving around and bouncing over huge potholes. Oncoming traffic frequently passed on the right as each driver sought a passable piece of road.

Without too much difficulty we found the hospital in Leogane, where we were told that Pere Albert would be easy to find. "Follow the highway south, toward Jacmel, until you come to your first right." We were to keep going until we saw a white church. Then we would be in Grand Colline.

As we followed the road climbing high above the valley, every slope was cultivated with struggling cornfields. Though we were

far from any recognizable town, there was still a constant parade of pedestrians down either side of the road: old women leading donkeys, men carrying machetes, and groups of children in ragged yellow uniforms with big, reproachful eyes. But we never saw anything that resembled “our first right.”

When we were almost to the beach, we found a dirt track leading into the mountains. It didn’t feel right, but it lay vaguely in the direction we wanted to go, so we rumbled off into the hills. People along the way watched silently as we drove by.

We tried to ask for directions. But since we didn’t speak Creole, we were forced to simply repeat, “Pere Albert? Grand Colline?” in hopes that someone would point.

As we drove higher into the mountains, I noticed stone tombs, built to look like tiny houses or cathedrals, in small clusters on the hilltops. Fog rolled in, reducing our visibility to a few hundred yards. The bleating of goats sounded almost like the wailing of lost souls.

We came to a familiar-looking crossroads. We had been there before . . . but on the other road.

We soon met a girl of maybe fourteen, whose face lit up when we said, “Pere Albert?” She jumped into the back of the truck and said with assurance, “We go!” But in a few minutes she seemed to lose confidence.

After a couple of hours, Eldon noticed the gas gauge nearing empty. “We need to get back to Port-au-Prince,” he said. “But which way?” We made a U-turn.

Eldon turned to me. “Scott, what are we going to do about this girl?”

No suitable answer came to mind. “I don’t know,” I said feebly. “Maybe we should tell her to get out.” She would be better off than we were, I rationalized.

The road appeared to end at a cliff just past a small market. As we got out of the car to investigate, rain began to fall. The market crowd eyed us warily.

When we returned to the car, Eldon couldn’t find the key. For a few minutes we stood in the pouring rain. The crowd edged

nearer. I wondered what kind of hospitality could be expected from these villagers if we ran out of gas. And I wondered how I'd ended up lost in these mountains so far from home.

Eventually Eldon and I decided to pray. We knew God had brought us this far for a reason.

Almost immediately after we said, "Amen," Eldon found the key. It was stuck in the driver's side door.

We headed in the direction we thought Port-au-Prince should be, still wondering what was the right thing to do with the girl. After we forded a small stream and started up the hill on the other side, several more children jumped in the back of the truck. Eldon didn't stop.

About a mile later, our young friend leaned into the cab and in plain, unaccented English said, "Stop! Stop!" She and the rest of the children jumped from the truck and ran to meet their friends. Behind a small grove of trees stood a white church. As I stepped out of the truck, a tall Haitian man came from the house nearby and wrapped me in a bear hug. We had found Pere Albert!

The three of us sat around a table and talked long into the night, our faces illuminated by a propane lantern. Pere Albert described the local struggle for survival. I learned he had almost single-handedly founded thirty schools in the parish and was now responsible for the education of more than eleven thousand children. The next morning we visited some nearby fields, where farmers eked out a living from the rocky mountainsides.

I had no intention of devoting my life to environmental issues. Yet somewhere on that trip, it dawned on me that they were foundational. The suffering masses in Port-au-Prince had come there because they felt they had more opportunity in that squalor than in the countryside.

The quaint, bucolic scenes of rural life hid a horror just beneath the surface. Every bit of land was used up, depleted, and divided, yet still was being used as farmland. Trucks rumbled past, hauling charcoal down from the mountains, creating more desert. In his book *The Immaculate Invasion*, Bob Shacochis described these same mountains:

[It was] the saddest mountain range on the planet, the first mountains I had ever seen that made me want to vomit, a line of ravaged peaks like a ward of cancer patients, a hardwood tropical forest from horizon to horizon reduced to little more than rain-crumbled rock.¹

Sadly, this is an apt description. Yet it makes me feel a bit defensive. Today, I know those mountains, and I know the people who live in them. I've developed a deep love and a great deal of respect for these people. I know their dreams, their courage, and the incredible persistence with which they work to take care of their families. I know the lack of opportunity that has made the destruction of this land inevitable. I also believe God knows those mountains and their people. He loves them and has a plan to redeem them and bless them.

As I observed these mountains, I realized how fundamental the work of reforestation and restoration is to the needs of the poor. And somehow I knew God was calling me to this ministry.

At the time I didn't realize how strongly the Bible encourages us to be stewards of God's creation. I didn't understand that caring for the environment is good and necessary because it shows respect and love for the Creator. I just knew people needed trees.

Five Relationships

I have traveled a long way, both figuratively and literally, since that afternoon on the ridge in Haiti—and I have learned a great deal.

First, I have learned that helping the poor in a significant way is considerably more difficult than I originally thought. I naïvely believed helping the poor would be fairly simple. I think most people underestimate the challenges involved.

Poverty stems from much more than a lack of resources. It can't be fixed just by giving more money or more stuff. In truth, poverty is a result of broken relationships as much as anything else. Anyone who has ever been part of a family knows fixing broken relationships is hard work, even if everyone is committed to the process.

When Plant With Purpose began, we looked to poverty's environmental roots, and we found this, too, was the result of a broken relationship: the relationship between human beings and the earth. As Plant With Purpose has grown, we have increasingly focused on four relationships that are key to any program hoping to bring lasting change. Jesus addressed two of these when a teacher of the law asked which commandment was most important. "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: . . . 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-31).

Our relationship with God is most important, and the second key relationship is with our neighbors. Jesus tells us we are to love him by caring for others. When Jesus was asked what that looked like, he responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Isaiah 58 and 1 John 4:20 give us further instruction on how to honor God in our relationships with other people.

Healing relationships is an important part of Plant With Purpose's discipleship programs. This emphasis is woven through our community organizing and the economic relationships we help to build. Our work is an expression of our love for God and neighbor.

There are two other relationships that are also important: our relationship with ourselves and our relationship with creation.

If we do not have an accurate view of who we are in God's universe, we will have a hard time loving anyone else. Many of us have an inflated sense of our importance and talents, which leads to pride, ignorance, and arrogance. On the other hand, others of us—especially those who are poor—tend to discount our importance and giftedness, which leads to helplessness and disempowerment. Both groups need to develop a more accurate understanding of who they are in relationship to God.

If we do not understand the tendency to distort our self-worth, especially as relationships are formed across cultures and economic classes, we can easily reinforce these distortions. Over and

over I have witnessed well-meaning visitors from the United States strengthen their own self-image as saviors as they inadvertently add to the sense of helplessness among the poor. The church is becoming more involved in overseas ministry due to easier communication and travel. Plant With Purpose has much to share about what works and what doesn't work in serving the poor.

The relationship between humans and creation is a topic that is gaining interest as the limits of our planet and the need for a coherent response from the church become apparent. That relationship is often taken for granted, but it is a sacred one, carrying with it important responsibilities.

To heal humanity's relationship with creation, Plant With Purpose encourages reforestation and sustainable agriculture. Providing economic opportunities by encouraging local enterprise creation addresses the relationships between people, as it levels the playing field for the disadvantaged and helps families stay together. Discipleship focuses on our relationship with God. By helping others follow Jesus and obey his commandments, thus fulfilling the Great Commission, we help to create a foundation upon which future development can be built.

Once we see the impact of environmental issues in the lives of the poor overseas, we will see more clearly the impact of these issues here at home. We will find ways to better honor God and offer justice to our neighbors, the poor, and creation.

There is a fifth relationship: the relationship between the creation and God, the Creator. God has not forgotten his love for the world and covenant with creation. We are reminded of this forcefully in Job 38, and more gently in Psalm 104. These passages reflect God's joy over creation and creation's enjoyment of God.

God created the universe, considers it good, enjoys it, and has asked us to take care of our corner of it for him. It is a responsibility we should take seriously.

Thanks on behalf of a little girl walking a dusty road in Haiti, because by learning about her connection to the land, you can help her find a better future.

Thanks on behalf of a woman and her children in southern Mexico whose husband had to head north seeking work because their farmlands no longer produce. By reading this book, you can become part of the solution to the far-reaching economic and ecological problems that have divided this dad from his wife and kids, plunging them all into insecurity.

Thanks on behalf of thousands of children who, because of the combined efforts of readers of this book, will not have to grow up in miserable slums ringing major cities around our world. By reading these chapters, we will learn how to make it possible for these kids to be raised in villages where caring people know their names and recognize their laughter, connected to the land and its fresh air and clean water, instead of being trapped in crime-ridden slums amidst mountains of trash, fetid with human excrement and disease.

And thanks on behalf of God's creatures who have no voices or language to speak up for themselves . . . for songbirds and monkeys, for turtles and butterflies, for wildflowers and coral. As you read this book, you'll understand that you are their advocate and that they depend on you to be sure they aren't plowed under or burned up or squeezed out by human beings who don't know what you know or feel what you feel because of reading this book. When they sing or fly or swim or bloom or grow and reproduce, that will be their way of thanking you.

Reading a book doesn't change the world any more than writing one does. But when writers and readers are informed and inspired, they can take action together, and when that happens, change isn't just possible; it's inevitable.

I've walked the same kinds of streets Scott writes about in this book. I've observed the little girls and boys sorting through trash. I've smelled the sewage, seen the flies, and swatted the mosquitoes. I've seen the erosion ditches measured in feet and yards, not inches, grabbed handfuls of the depleted and sun-baked soil, witnessed the refugees lining the streets in search of a few dollars'

worth of hope . . . on their road to somewhere, anywhere more green. I've seen treeless hills, the charcoal pits, the bush meat hanging in the markets, the distended bellies, the girls walking for miles for water or firewood . . . all signs that the sacred covenant of balance between people and the land has been broken.

And I've met many of the people who work with Scott in teaching people how to restore the covenant. I've heard their stories of helping people find the right trees and crops and farming practices so that their lives are filled with much less desperation and much more shalom. I've felt their passion for wisely using every dollar donated to micro-enterprise, micro-finance, and sustainable farming. I've seen their eyes light up when they find someone who is beginning to "get it" when it comes to the spirituality of ecology and stewardship of the land, themes about which the Bible has so much to teach.

That's why I care so much about the message of this book, and that's why I'm so glad you're going to read it. That's why I'm so hopeful that, as you read, you might join the Plant with Purpose movement, seeking to restore our world so that it looks a lot more like Eden and feels a lot less like hell. That's why, from the bottom of my heart, I say once more, thank you.

Brian McLaren
Laurel, Maryland