

Going Green: Member schools share commitment and best practices

More than forty-five theological schools from the evangelical, mainline, and Roman Catholic traditions have joined the Green Seminary Initiative and/or the Seminary Stewardship Alliance to share best practices for teaching and practicing an environmental ethic in the seminary context. From green buildings and grounds, to organic campus gardens, to specialized environmental degree programs and courses, these schools are demonstrating ways to incorporate creation care into both the student experience and the broader communities those students will ultimately serve.



The [Green Seminary Initiative \(GSI\)](#) is dedicated to encouraging schools and congregations to incorporate ecological concerns and care for creation into the mission and practice of their institutions. So far, reports from about forty-five seminaries showcase a variety of approaches to incorporating green ethics in the missions, curricula, and facilities of theological schools.

The [Seminary Stewardship Alliance \(SSA\)](#), established by the [Blessed Earth Foundation](#), is a consortium of “seminary leaders who covenant to teach, preach, model, and hold each other accountable for good stewardship practices.” Twenty schools are currently SSA signatories.

Some schools have joined both SSA and GSI.

A wealth of options

To begin the process of assessing where schools are generally with issues of environmental concern, GSI’s Laurel Kearns (Drew University Theological School) and Beth Norcross (Wesley Theological Seminary) surveyed seventeen schools with active initiatives. What they discovered was that “creation care is still an add-on at most schools, not part of their mission.” None of the schools surveyed had fully integrated creation-care programs, although Fuller Theological Seminary recently hired its first sustainability coordinator, with the support of a seed grant from Blessed Earth, to support the institutional conversation of just stewardship and environmental sustainability and to execute an audit and an action plan. For the most part, however, the efforts to date have been ad hoc individual efforts,

championed primarily by faculty, to pursue social justice or tackle specific ecological challenges.

Yet the schools associated with both GSI and SSA have devised a wealth of ways to address environmental issues—in mission, in academics, in buildings and grounds, in worship, in community life, and in public advocacy.

The initiatives at embedded schools, those affiliated with larger institutions, seem to be the most successful, and three successful programs have partnered with other schools within their universities—two with forestry schools and one with a medical school. The size of enrollment, however, seems to play no particular role in the success of

mission statements of many schools, some have developed models of integration in their planning strategies. Seattle University’s Climate Action Plan, for example, sets forth both general and specific goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions over the next twenty years, for growing curricular and cocurricular programs, and for expanding partnerships and community engagement.

Buildings and grounds

Extending beyond goals to bricks-and-mortar commitments, a number of schools boast buildings with [LEED](#) (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification by the US Green Building Council. LEED facilities earn scores for lowering operating costs, conserving energy and

other resources, providing healthy and safe environments, and qualifying for money-saving incentives like tax rebates and zoning allowances. They range from small renovations to major new construction.

Chicago Theological Seminary’s new 80,000-square-foot structure has achieved LEED-gold certification with an array of sustainable features, including a 5,000-square-foot vegetative roof that reduces the building’s heat island effect and reduces storm water

runoff while also providing a green oasis for the seminary community.

At Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (LTSG), the chapel has been retrofitted with geothermal heating and cooling—making use of the earth’s constant subsurface temperature—and a new habitat plan will result in less mowing, greater



Photo courtesy of Chicago Theological Seminary

The chapel wall at Chicago Theological Seminary maximizes natural lighting to interior spaces by its creative use of reflective panels, windows, and skylights.

creation-care efforts. Building on the momentum begun by the survey, twenty-six schools have added their individual school profiles to the GSI site so far. These profiles and other projects offer considerable inspiration for the green-minded school.

Mission and strategic planning

While greening has not yet found its way to the

tree canopy, and a porous outdoor walkway with interpretive signage about the campus habitat.

The improvements yielded by these buildings and grounds projects are measurable. GSI recommends starting with an energy audit. Harvard University Divinity School's recent audit determined that they could be saving more than \$100,000 annually in energy expenses. After students in LTSG's Ecology and Stewardship class calculated the carbon footprint of its fifty-two-acre campus, new low-flow nozzles and aerators installed campus-wide save an estimated 500,000 gallons of water annually. In the heart of New York City, General Theological Seminary's conversion to a geothermal heating/cooling system in its west quadrant has yielded a reduction in the school's carbon footprint by more than 1,400 tons of CO2 emissions annually.

Campus life—energy, food, recycling, and more

Building projects often trigger broader interest in campus-wide green practices and lifestyle choices. Since Duke University Divinity School pioneered local, sustainable, and economically just food in its refectory in 2005, other schools have followed suit. Campus gardens are supplementing food service operations while doubling as lessons in creation stewardship.



Photo courtesy of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

In addition to utilizing technology to cut paper waste, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary installed renewable heating and cooling for two dormitories undergoing major remodeling.

Paper waste is also a target of these green initiatives. During the past year, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary has begun to post all handouts, syllabi, and reserve materials on Moodle rather than distributing photocopies. As a result, copying in the library has decreased by 52 percent from 2007.

Curriculum design

Ensuring that the environmental ethic is spread beyond campus limits, many schools have incorporated environmental concerns into their curricula. For some, the commitment involves an entire degree program or concentration. Brite Divinity School, for example, has instituted a new Masters of Divinity curriculum—with specific learning outcomes—that includes an emphasis on eco-justice.

Wesley Theological Seminary offers a Doctor of Ministry program in Ecology, Theology, and Ministry. Catholic Theological Union offers an MA in Social Justice Ministry with an environmental justice concentration, and Methodist Theological School in Ohio offers an MA in Practical Theology with an ecology and justice specialization.

Some join forces to expand their offerings. At Duke University Divinity School, students may pursue a dual degree program with the Nicholas School of the Environment. And Yale University Divinity School offers a joint degree program with the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. Other schools offer an array of courses within the context of traditional degree programs. Courses approach the topic from a variety of perspectives such as Apocalyptic Ecology; Agrarian Theology for an Urban World; Greening of Feminism; Food, Land, and Faith Formation; and Greening Congregations.

Scholarship

The topic is inspiring scholarship as well, with dozens of faculty members publishing both for their guilds and for the general public. [GSI](#) and [SSA](#) both maintain growing lists of resources that include more than fifteen years of scholarship, both geared toward individual ecclesial families and approaching environmental stewardship from an interfaith perspective.

Worship

The GSI survey identified worship within the theological school community as an area with significant potential for engagement with environmental



Wesley Theological Seminary completed a new, 76-bed, residence hall that is LEED certified at the silver level and secures its energy through a wind-power cooperative.

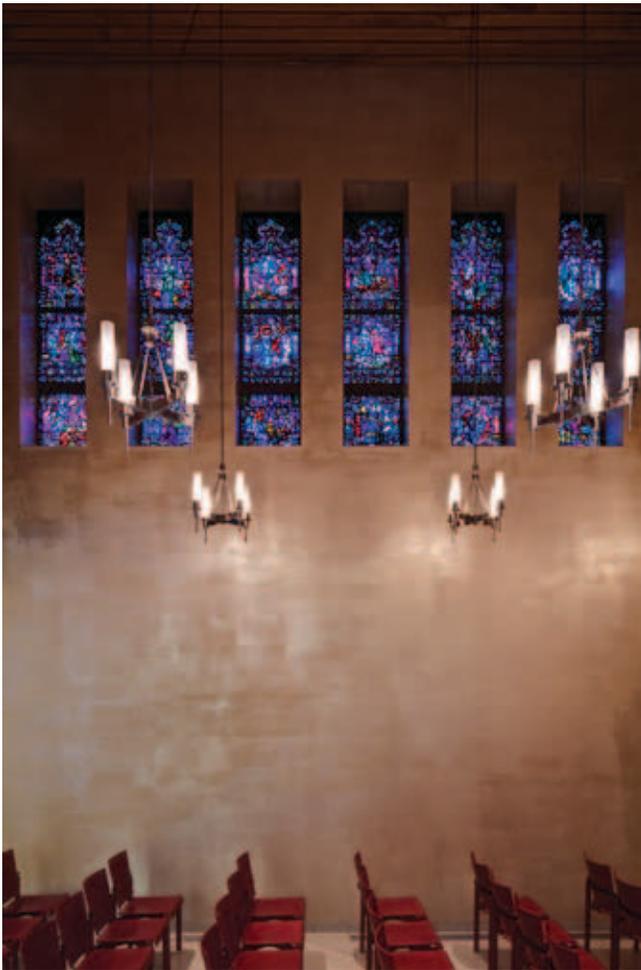
Photo used with permission from Wesley Theological Seminary. ©EricTaylorPhoto.com

issues. But it is arguably the area in which schools have invested the least. Only two schools among the forty-five that have submitted GSI seminary profiles to date—both of them Roman Catholic—include prayer for the gift of creation in their regular worship.

Community outreach

Looking beyond their immediate seminary contexts, cohorts of interested students, faculty, and staff are reaching out to their broader communities through educational and lobbying initiatives. At Boston University School of Theology, concerns center around greenhouse gas reduction, subsidization of the green economy, regulation of polluting industries, stimulation of research into alternative energy technology, and policies that promote organic and fair trade agriculture. A few students and a faculty member serve on the Environmental Justice Task Force of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, which engages in advocacy.

For Dean Gail O'Day at Wake Forest, where faculty and students maintain a sustainability club called EcoTHEO, food ministries seek to increase access and quality of the local food environment. "Food



Reused local materials, such as the stained glass, tile, and other materials from its former location, were repurposed into the plans and architecture of Clark Chapel at Chicago Theological Seminary.

is our closest link to the land,” O’Day says. “When you know farmers, you know that food is not simply a commodity. It is the way some people make a living. My food decisions have justice implications for other people. We need to stop and think about the interconnectedness of everything and the impact we can have on the common good.”

These initiatives among theological schools converge with efforts among churches to transform their worship and ministry spaces into environmentally friendly places. An article in [Faith Today](#) last December showcased the work of a handful of churches working with the encouragement of [Greening Sacred Spaces](#), an organization that promotes not only greening church facilities but also

raising awareness through educational sessions, worship, and community gardening.

Certification

Also working with congregations is [GreenFaith](#), whose mission is to inspire, educate, and mobilize people of diverse religious backgrounds for environmental leadership. GreenFaith has pioneered a program for certifying houses of worship that has proven successful across twelve states in congregations ranging in size from 50 to 5,000 members.

Building on that initiative, GSI is currently working with GreenFaith on plans to offer schools a similar opportunity to pursue Green Seminary Certification. This designation will allow schools to have a strategic, specific structure for integrating creation care into their missions and programs.

“More and more, seminaries are realizing the importance of ecological issues to the foundations of our faith,” explains GSI’s Kearns. “The certification process offers a well-organized, effective process to integrate the Earth into theological education in a holistic manner.”

A two-way street

Students respond positively to the environmental ethic being forwarded by participating schools. According to Carol Robb at San Francisco Theological Seminary, students have commented that when they work on an environmental project together, “it seems the earth is also healing us.”

Dozens of syllabi contributed by participating schools are available for download on the [GSI](#) and [SSA](#) sites.