

Small Group Ministry Program for
Prairie Soul
Finding Grace in the Earth Beneath My Feet

by **Jeffrey A. Lockwood**

BACKGROUND

The reading-and-discussion program for this book is organized around four sessions. Each session can stand alone, so participants can come to any or all of the meetings. The only requirement is that the participants read the assigned essays before the discussion (35 to 45 pages, which should take perhaps an hour or so) and complete brief assignments. The **Preparations** for both participants and leaders, including the assignments, are explained in more detail beginning on page 2. The four sets of readings are:

- Meeting 1:** “Prologue” through “Baring My Soles” (pp. xi-31)
- Meeting 2:** “Prayerful Science” and “The Good Hunt” (pp. 33-66)
- Meeting 3:** “Sanctuary” through “Xenophobia” (pp. 67-106)
- Meeting 4:** “Steppe Into the World” through “Epilogue” (pp. 107-141)

Each meeting can be conducted in as little as an hour, although 2 hours is optimal (longer gatherings may be workable for some groups but typically energy begins to wane). If you choose to meet for less than 2 hours, rather than hurrying through each element it is advisable to simply omit a component of the program (e.g., the **Activity** or the **Small Group Questions**). A meeting consists of an opening, four activities, and a closing. The programs are designed to provide enough depth to allow meaningful discussion and sufficient variation to keep people engaged.

Feedback on how well this program works for you is warmly invited. Email your comments to editorialdirector@uua.org.

MEETING ELEMENTS

Opening & Closing

A brief opening and closing ceremony or prayer that is appropriate for your religious community should be adopted. This action makes explicit the spiritual meaning and religious context of the gathering. For example, you can use a chalice lighting or a familiar opening prayer. If there is no such practice or you want something novel, you might consider a few minutes of silence, or a selection from Elizabeth Roberts’ *Earth Prayers*, or a poem (good sources include: Pattiann Rogers’ *Firekeeper*, Gary Snyder’s *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, Wendell Berry’s *A Timbered Choir*, and Mary Oliver’s *Why I Wake Early*), or a selection from the UU hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition* (see the selections in the “Topical Index of Readings” under the entries of Animals, Beauty, Earth, Ecology, Evolution, Nature and the Countryside, Seasons and Cycles and the individual seasons).

Topic Statements (approximately 30 minutes)

The statements have been excerpted or adapted from the reading. It is highly unlikely that there will be sufficient time to discuss all of the topic statements, so the leader or participants can select

those statements that seem most interesting and thereby tailor the discussion to whatever topics those gathered find most compelling. Using any approach that seems appropriate for the group, a topic statement is chosen and read aloud. Then, each participant posts his/her response to the statement using one of the six cards. The only rule is that each person must always have one card posted for all to see, but individuals are free to change their cards/responses as the discussion proceeds if they decide that another perspective is convincing. The leader can use the posted responses to elicit discussion, asking individuals to give reasons for their reactions and then turning to participants with different responses and asking for their perspectives. The respectful exploration of differences is key to this aspect of the meeting, and discussions are most lively and interesting when people disagree—and when they listen carefully to why others believe as they do. When the leader has determined that a particular topic statement has been sufficiently discussed, another statement is chosen and the process is repeated.

Summary of Assignment Responses (15 minutes)

Present a summary of the participants' responses from the assignments they completed before the meeting. Charts are provided for these summaries in the **Preparations** section beginning on page 2.

Small Group Questions (approximately 45 minutes: allow about 20 minutes for the groups to discuss their chosen/assigned question and about 25 minutes for the leaders to report the answers of their groups, with 5-10 minutes for each depending on the number of small groups)

Organize the participants into groups of 3-5 individuals during the meeting. Each group can be assigned a question by the leader or the groups can be allowed to select whichever question is most interesting to them. The former approach insures that all of the questions are addressed, but the latter approach insures that each group is addressing a question of keen interest. If more than one group selects a particular question, it can be interesting to see how their answers converge or diverge. For this element of the meeting to run smoothly, it is best to assign a leader-reporter for each group (or allow the group to quickly identify an individual from among their members). This individual should keep the discussion focused on the question(s) that were assigned/chosen. As space allows, provide the small groups with places where they can meet and talk with minimum distraction from the other groups. At the end of a 20-minute discussion period (it is advisable to give the groups a warning at 15 minutes that they should begin to conclude their discussion), reconvene the participants. Each leader-reporter is responsible for providing a concise summary of the group's discussion and answers.

Activity (approximately 30 minutes, although this element of the meeting is quite flexible in terms of time)

The activity itself should be allowed about 15 minutes (i.e., shoed/barefoot walking in Meeting 1; arranging the altars in Meeting 2; walking/naming in Meeting 3; listening/writing in Meeting 4). Then, (re)convene the participants and allow an open discussion of what they felt, brought, saw, or heard in the exercise.

PREPARATIONS

Each participant should complete the **Assignment** for each meeting in advance and give their responses to the leader at the beginning of the meeting. You can look through the responses and summarize them while the participants are working on the **Small Group Questions**. The summary of the responses can be presented and briefly discussed before the Small Group leaders give their reports. Use a large sheet of

paper, black/white board or other presentation aid to efficiently summarize the participants' responses (see each meeting's assignment for relevant details). The assignment and leader summaries for each meeting are on the following pages.

The group will need to divide into sub-groups for each meeting, so decide in advance how many subgroups you want and how they will be chosen.

ASSIGNMENT FOR MEETING 1

Read “Prologue” through “Baring My Soles” (pp. xi-31).

Consider the following places: canyon/valley (C), mountain (M), forest (F), desert (D), lake/river (W), seashore (S), grassland/meadow (G), marsh/swamp (M), urban (U).

Fill in the blank of the following with one of these types of places:

I am most at home in _____

I am least at home in _____

I feel most alive in _____

I am most humbled by _____

I am closest to the divine in _____

I am most energized in _____

I am most at peace in _____

I am most anxious in _____

My life is most like _____

My faith is most like _____

Our society least values _____

LEADER'S SUMMARY FOR MEETING 1

Assignment

Use the following table (put a check or tally mark in each cell for each response to summarize the participants' responses):

Question:	C	M	F	D	W	S	G	M	U
most at home									
least at home									
most alive									
most humbled									
closest to divine									
most energized									
most at peace									
most anxious									
life is like									
faith is like									
least valued									

Topic Statements

Make a set of six 3x5 cards for each participant. The cards should have the following abbreviations written in large letters: SA (strongly agree), A (agree), MA (mildly agree), MD (mildly disagree), D (disagree), and SD (strongly disagree). It might help to write the three agree-type responses with a green marker and the three disagree-type responses with a red marker to make the distinctions easier to track. You can also provide each set of cards with a small binder clip to serve as a stand for the chosen card.

Small Group Questions

Identify spaces where small groups can meet and converse with minimal noise interference.

Activity

Identify spaces appropriate for walking or sitting outside.

ASSIGNMENT FOR MEETING 2

Read “Prayerful Science” and “The Good Hunt” (pp. 33-66).

What is your job or profession? _____.

If prayer is a deliberate dialogue with the divine, what percentage of people in this job/profession pray about their work? _____.

What is the most/least common form of prayer in this line of work (the forms described in the reading are: adoration, contemplation, confession, thanksgiving, and petition)?

most = _____

least = _____

The **Activity** requires that you bring some objects with you to the meeting. Ralph Waldo Emerson maintained that, “We all worship something—and what we worship we are becoming.” This evokes a kind of spiritual metamorphosis. Bring with you for a communal altar three objects (natural or human-made):

- 1) an object that represents what you worship and are becoming,
- 2) an object that represents what you seek to worship and to become,
- 3) an object that represents what our society worships and is becoming.

LEADER'S SUMMARY FOR MEETING 2

Assignment

Use the following table (allow one row in the table for each participant; it may be interesting to put similar kinds of work together for purposes of comparison):

Kind of work	% who pray	Form of prayer	
		Most common	Least common

Topic Statements

Bring the sets of 3x5 cards for each participant that were prepared for the first meeting.

Small Group Questions

Identify spaces where small groups can meet and converse with minimal noise interference.

Activity

Prior to the meeting, remind participants to bring objects (an email reminder during the week might be helpful). At this meeting, you might want to set up three places/altars for: what participants are becoming, what participants seek to become, and what our society is becoming.

ASSIGNMENT FOR MEETING 3

Read “Sanctuary” through “Xenophobia” (pp. 67-106).

Rate on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 10 (completely):

	Today	10 years ago
I am indigenous to this ecosystem.	_____	_____
I am indigenous to this religious community.	_____	_____
I am indigenous to this town/city.	_____	_____
I am xenophobic.	_____	_____

LEADER'S SUMMARY FOR MEETING 3

Assignment

Use the following table (bring a calculator to figure out the averages):

Statement: I am...	Today			10 years ago		
	Average	High	Low	Average	High	Low
indigenous to this ecosystem						
indigenous to this religious community						
indigenous to this town/city						
xenophobic						

Topic Statements

Bring the sets of 3x5 cards for each participant that were prepared for the first meeting.

Small Group Questions

Identify spaces where small groups can meet and converse with minimal noise interference.

Activity

Identify spaces appropriate for walking or sitting outside.

ASSIGNMENT FOR MEETING 4

Read “Steppe Into the World” through “Epilogue” (pp. 107-141).

Jean Henri Fabre made wonderful discoveries within a 2 hour walk of his home. Go out the front door, and take a 10 minute walk from your home. Keenly attend to the natural world—the sky, the clouds, the trees, the weeds, the insects, the birds, the landscape, the soil. Write down the most interesting question you have or observation you make about the natural world.

LEADER'S SUMMARY FOR MEETING 4*Assignment*

Simply transcribe the questions/observations that the participants report.

Topic Statements

Bring the sets of 3x5 cards for each participant that were prepared for the first meeting.

Small Group Questions

Identify spaces where small groups can meet and converse with minimal noise interference.

Activity

Identify spaces appropriate for walking or sitting outside.

MEETING 1

Topic Statements

For each of the following statements derived from the reading, indicate whether you: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Mildly Agree (MA), Mildly Disagree (MD), Disagree (D) or Strongly Disagree (SD).

- _____ Every seed, touch, and word means nothing—and everything.
 _____ Only humans make straight paths.
 _____ To live authentically in a place, we must change it and be changed by it.
 _____ We invariably do less harm when we move slowly.
 _____ To never help a stranger puts one at grave, spiritual risk.
 _____ No amount of reason and analysis can replace wisdom and experience.
 _____ We have replaced physical violence with psychological and spiritual violence.
 _____ There are many Gods not worthy of our faith.

Summary of Assignment Responses

Small Group Questions (your leader will form participants into groups during the meeting)

Group 1. “His land is not pretty. But it is beautiful...” What is the difference between a place or person being pretty and beautiful? What land or habitat in your region is beautiful but not pretty? What buildings, people, animals, and plants qualify in these regards? What place or object in your church would not appear pretty to a visitor but is beautiful to those who know its story?

Group 2. “I have formulated my expectations of the divine in simple terms.” What are your expectations of the divine (or God or whatever captures this sense)? What must be the qualities of the divine/God for it to be worthy of our faith? What Gods are not worthy of our faith and why do some people believe in them? Must the divine/God be either immanent or transcendent? Both immanent and transcendent?

Group 3. Lockwood writes about twisted places and their virtues. What are the twisted places—literally or metaphorically—in your life, church, town/city, and surrounding region? Were any of the currently straight things or processes once twisted? Could any of the straight things be improved by bending? What things or processes are better when straight? When are speed, efficiency, and safety not good for us?

Group 4. Lockwood asserts that we are protected by the shells of walls and insurance. What other shells do we use to keep from being crushed? What dangers are we most worried about, and what is the cost of the corresponding shells? Would we be happier if these shells were thinner or abandoned entirely? What are the shells in your religious community? How did they originate and are they still needed?

Activity

Take a 5-minute walk in your shoes and remember your path—then repeat it in bare feet. Attend to the feeling of what is underfoot. How do your experience, knowledge, pace, and pleasure/pain change without shoes? What are the (dis)advantages of engaging nature with naked soles?

MEETING 2

Topic Statements

For each of the following statements derived from the reading, indicate whether you: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Mildly Agree (MA), Mildly Disagree (MD), Disagree (D) or Strongly Disagree (SD).

- _____ Science and religion are and should be kept separate and independent.
 _____ Objectivity has a vital place in scientific and spiritual practices.
 _____ Everyone prays—some people just call it something else.
 _____ We are all killers—some people are simply more aware of this than others.
 _____ Deep, authentic friendship can exclude certain subjects of discussion.
 _____ To hunt and kill with keen awareness is an act of courage.
 _____ There is no question, the answer to which is worth dying for.
 _____ All prayers are answered.

Summary of Assignment Responses

Small Group Questions (your leader will form participants into groups during the meeting)

Group 1. The divine can be defined as that which is enveloping and real, to which the individual responds solemnly and tenderly. If so, what do you and your religious community find divine? What is *not* divine or potentially divine in our world? Is being divine a quality of something, or is it given by us, or is it a kind of interaction/relationship? How would you modify the above definition of the divine?

Group 2. There are prayers of adoration, contemplation, confession, thanksgiving, and petition. Which of these is most/least compelling to you and to your religious community? Which form, if practiced more often, would enhance your life, your religious community, the natural world? Which form is most/least appropriate in response to the natural world? Does prayer require words, thoughts, actions, or intentions?

Group 3. “We cannot but pity the boy who has never fired a gun.” Is there such a thing as a good hunt—one that enhances our spiritual life—in modern society? What must happen for a hunt to be (more) virtuous? What is the best/worst reason for a person to hunt? Is hunting a better or worse way of feeding ourselves than raising animals for food? Is our anxiety about hunting rooted in our fear of death?

Group 4. What makes an event, relationship or story tragic? Are natural disasters tragedies? Should we avoid tragedy whenever possible, or are there tragedies that we should allow—or even seek? Is hunting inevitably tragic? Is all killing tragic? What is the proper role of tragedy in our spiritual lives, in our religious services, in our human community, or in the natural world?

Activity

“We all worship something—and what we worship we are becoming.” This evokes a kind of spiritual metamorphosis. Bring with you for a communal altar three objects (natural or human-made): 1) an object that represents what you worship and are becoming, 2) an object that represents what you seek to worship and to become, and 3) an object that represents what our society worships and is becoming.

MEETING 3

Topic Statements

For each of the following statements derived from the reading, indicate whether you: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Mildly Agree (MA), Mildly Disagree (MD), Disagree (D) or Strongly Disagree (SD).

- _____ The moral cost of human-caused extinctions is always greater than the benefits.
 _____ It is right to mourn the extinction of any species, culture, language or idea.
 _____ If a population of the Rocky Mountain locust was found today, we should protect it.
 _____ In an important way, we are all from somewhere else.
 _____ Some people of European descent are indigenous to America.
 _____ Immigrants should seek to become indigenous to their new homelands.
 _____ We can originate, grow and become natural to a place where we were not born.
 _____ “New” rarely means “better.”

Summary of Assignment Responses

Small Group Questions (your leader will form participants into groups during the meeting)

Group 1. Give a compelling example of sacredness coming from sacrifice (loss, denial, suffering). Can good come from evil, beauty from ugliness, morality from depravity, kindness from cruelty, justice from unfairness? Are all losses sacrifices? What makes a loss a sacrifice? When is sacrifice a good/bad thing for our spiritual lives? What is the most important sacrifice that you’ve made in your life?

Group 2. Political views are often dichotomized in terms of conservatives and progressives. When is “staying put” a virtue (give an example)? When does change constitute progress (give an example)? How do we know if a new idea, person, or technology is good? What aspects of yourself, your church, and your society are changing too fast/slow for the good of people and the environment?

Group 3. What is the difference between a colonist and an immigrant? What makes a European arriving to America in 1600 a colonist and a Mexican arriving here in 2012 an immigrant? Could an American today validly consider a Latino/a a colonist? What about non-native species—should we prevent them from arriving and eradicate them if they become established?

Group 4. Consider Lockwood’s three rules of human-nature relations: act slowly, move gently, watch carefully. Do they work for climate change and emerging diseases? If not, how should they be modified? Are they sufficient for human-human relations when it comes to changes? How would you revise the rules for dealing with newly arriving people, species, ideas, or technologies?

Activity

“We can either become indigenous or extinct.” Are you becoming indigenous? Take a 10-15 minute walk outside and see what plants, animals, soils, clouds, and topographic features you can name. How many of the species or kinds that you find on your walk are native or indigenous to this place? What makes learning the names of other organisms (including members of your congregation) a spiritual discipline?

MEETING 4

Topic Statements

For each of the following statements derived from the reading, indicate whether you: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Mildly Agree (MA), Mildly Disagree (MD), Disagree (D) or Strongly Disagree (SD).

- _____ In the end, one must rely on sustaining good land and making good friends.
 _____ We are individually responsible for our government's actions.
 _____ You can't fully appreciate your homeland until you've left it, at least for awhile.
 _____ Romance and sentiment are paths to important truths.
 _____ All forms of life can experience and express joy.
 _____ Darwin was right, the happy survive and multiply.
 _____ International cooperation and development are never ultimately altruistic.
 _____ Experience matters as much as reason.

Summary of Assignment Responses

Small Group Questions (your leader will form participants into groups during the meeting)

Group 1. "Our common enemies are not grasshoppers and locusts but hunger, poverty and fear." Is it helpful to think in terms of enemies and allies? Does this promote a war metaphor—and is this way of framing the world often or ever appropriate? Isn't all of nature an ally or are some species our enemies? What do we mistake today as an enemy and what price do we pay for our error?

Group 2. "...ancient cultures understand that leaders flourish and die like the annual grasses and that politics blow with the wind." What does this long-term perspective suggest for our country? Can we rely on leaders and political systems? If not, where should we put our faith? Can we rely on the natural world? What aspects of the world are ephemeral and which can we count on in our lives?

Group 3. What organisms (animals, plants, microbes) forge links between this country and other nations? How are individual people linked by other organisms (animals, plants, microbes)? If your church had an iconic organism, what would it be? What would your family or individual totem be? What organisms do humans link together for better or for worse?

Group 4. "Not all silences are the same." Describe a kind of silence that evokes anger, anxiety, fear, joy, peace, and reverence. How are silences manifest in nature? How do humans most often use silence? What places in the natural and built realms are most and least quiet? What do these silences (and their lack) mean for these places? What is the longest period of waking silence in your life this past week?

Activity

Go outside and listen quietly for 10-15 minutes. Write down everything that you hear. What is the loudest sound, the softest, the most frequent, the most soothing, the most discordant? How many sounds come from human versus non-human activities? What do these sounds reveal about this place and about its relationship to the natural world? How would you go about improving this soundscape?

