

Bethel College Mennonite Church Creation Care Committee
Creation Stewardship Notes # 25, October 2007
CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO THE NATURAL WORLD
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“The Earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof; the World and they that dwell therein.” --Psalms 24, 1

With the steadily increasing urbanization of our society, it is apparent that as children grow up their space is more and more restricted, and their activities increasingly organized and dominated. How then shall they be introduced to and gain a meaningful understanding of the natural world all about us? No doubt there are many venues and many ways including schools, books, laboratories, television, internet, travel and others. Our local Sand Creek Trail (SCT) offers an opportunity to children in this area for some direct multi-sensory experiences of several aspects of raw nature which are commonly manifest in woods and streams. The following two anecdotes illustrate how this can work.

While walking along the trail this past Summer, I met a lad perhaps 10 years of age who was walking with an older woman who was his grandmother. The boy seemed rather excited as he showed me a snakeskin that apparently had been shed quite recently. He held it up proudly and seemed very elated about his discovery. The lady said that her grandson loved coming to these woods, and to come here with him was something she could do for him. She indicated to me that he was in some way a troubled child, and that coming to this trail was something he enjoyed and she thought was very good for him. I responded approvingly, and suggested that this can be a good way for children to become interested in and learn a great deal about nature. I added that I knew of several noted scientists whose careers got their start by exploring this very Sand Creek and its environs. The grandmother seemed very pleased, and told me they lived in Newton, but I did not ask her to identify herself.

Just a week or so later, I saw a white-haired lady sitting on a stump near the low-water bridge crossing Sand Creek, and a boy, perhaps 10 or 11 years of age, in the water with a net trying to capture some of the creatures in the water. I walked on farther to the next bench, and after ten minutes or so retraced my steps. By this time the two were actually on the trail ready to return to the Trailhead. It seemed appropriate to engage them in conversation. The young boy at once eagerly showed me what was in his pail that he had caught in the creek that day, and then proceeded to tell me about the other species he had found on other visits. The grandmother introduced herself, and I learned that she actually lived in North Newton. She said her grandson simply loves the woods and Sand Creek, but that they find it difficult to access Sand Creek anywhere else, and that this was the best place for her grandson to get to the Creek. I repeated to them the fact that several notable scientists had gotten a start on their careers by doing precisely what this boy was doing. I added that children should be encouraged in such expressions of interest in nature, and welcomed his return to Sand Creek Trail in the future to explore the woods and the creek.

HOW THE SAND CREEK TRAIL CAME TO BE

For the first several decades following the founding of Bethel College, the campus was often flooded by Kidron Creek after a heavy rain. To correct this, a drainage ditch was dug in 1925 along the northern edge of the campus to the Sand Creek a certain distance east. In the early days it was referred to as “The Ditch”, but more recently has come to be known as the Kidron-Martin Canal. After three quarters of a century this “ditch” has steadily eroded and become markedly deepened and widened. It is now covered and surrounded with a dense growth of trees of various species as well as other vegetation. In the course of time college students and others in the community made a rudimentary path along the north side of the canal to the Sand Creek, and then north along the banks of Sand Creek itself. Where this path began near the bridge just East of the Granary Building, there was a steel cable strung across this path with a metal sign attached thereto bearing the warning “KEEP OUT”. By no means was this an invitation to explore the woods, though it might have challenged some courageous souls to do so. Over time a definite little path was formed cutting through the brush and around this forbidding barricade. Through the years, however, relatively few persons used this approach to these woods and the Sand Creek.

Early in 1997 a few local citizens felt that a well-developed path into the woods and along Sand Creek made available to all ages would be a desirable asset to the community. They saw the possibility of expanding

and developing this existing path, and doing so primarily with volunteer labor. Since this proposed project was entirely located on Bethel College property except for a few yards, the Bethel College Administration was approached to request their official permission and cooperation. Happily, there was complete and firm endorsement, and it was agreed that this project should go forward. The Department of Health and Physical Education, the Biology Department and the Maintenance Department were asked to assist the volunteer Sand Creek Trail Committee as seemed appropriate. The Kansas Gas & Electric Co. agreed to supply woodchips to help make it an all-weather trail. Westar has continued to honor this courtesy. The city of North Newton has also been very helpful in a number of ways. All this inter-agency cooperation has enabled Bethel College to make the Sand Creek Trail available to the larger community thereby adding to the quality of life in this area..

Work on clearing the trail began in early 1997 when repeated work days were scheduled and large numbers of volunteers came out to clear some excrescent growth of tatarian honeysuckle, invasive Siberian elm trees, old barbed wire fencing and other impediments. The majority of these volunteers came from the Bethel College Mennonite Church, but a sizable portion also from other groups in the community. Many Bethel College students have helped by spreading chips and doing other maintenance work. About a ½ acre patch of what had once been the city dump was covered with young Siberian elms. These were all cut down and replaced with bare root sprouts of bur oak, green ash, black walnut and other native species. These were carefully watered and nurtured for three years, and most of these trees are now 20 feet tall. The cut Siberian elms were used to build primitive footbridges over a couple of run-off ravines that cut across the trail. Most of the existing species of trees as well as other shrubs and vegetation have been identified along the trail. The woods is also home to a wide variety of birds, animals and insects.

East of the Tennis Courts and the Granary Building, the Bethel College Memorial Grove (BCMG) was established adjacent to the Sand Creek Trail. It serves as a place where persons who once were or now are meaningfully connected to Bethel College or the North Newton Community may be honored by having an engraved brick placed in the walkway approaching the Fire Circle. It was also designed to provide an attractive and safe outdoor meeting place for small groups of students and others around a controlled limestone fire circle. Special features associated with BCMG include an attractive pagoda and the wood sculpture carved by John Gaeddert from a Siberian elm and named “The Plainsman”. Financing of the Memorial Grove came primarily from the sale of memorial bricks and the 50% matching funds for such contributions by the Central Kansas Foundation. The current goal is to raise an endowment fund in the amount of \$100,000, the proceeds of which will enable Bethel College to employ students or other residents part-time to maintain SCT and BCMG.

Among the most recent developments is the extension of the Newton Sand Creek “Hiker-Biker” Trail from Centennial Park to the Bethel College Campus. It has recently been referred to as the Trail of Two Cities. It intersects with the Bethel College Sand Creek Trail at the Plainsman Sculpture and the Memorial Grove. In the Spring of 2006 the SCT Committee cleared a number of nondescript trash trees along Highway K15 north of the MCC Headquarters. These were replaced with two rows of trees 25 feet apart, composed of 18 different species and totaling 54 trees. The Sand Creek Trail running between these two rows of trees has been dubbed “Arbor Lane.”

The Sand Creek Trail symbolizes the transition from prohibition to invitation to enter the woods. It also encompasses several examples of transformation from negative to positive approaches to Nature. It is hoped that this facility will increasingly be utilized by families with young children and other individuals and groups who serve children to introduce them to the Wonders and Mysteries of Nature, to develop positive attitudes and understandings of the cosmos, all of which can lead to an appreciation of all aspects of life within us and around us. Such experiences can help individuals to come to understand and eventually internalize what some of the most prominent scientists, theologians, and philosophers have had to say about Creation and the Creative Process: **Jesus:** “The Kingdom of God is within (and among) you.”

Albert Schweitzer: “Reverence for Life”.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardain: “The Divine Milieu”, or “Spirit and Matter are One”.

Albert Einstein: “Awe and Wonder”.

Gordon Kaufman: “The Ultimate Mystery of Life”.

Among the many contemporary writers in this field are Wendell Berry and Richard Louv. Louv’s new book *LAST CHILD IN THE WOODS* will eventually be in the BCMC church library. The Boston Globe says, “This book is an absolute must read for parents.”