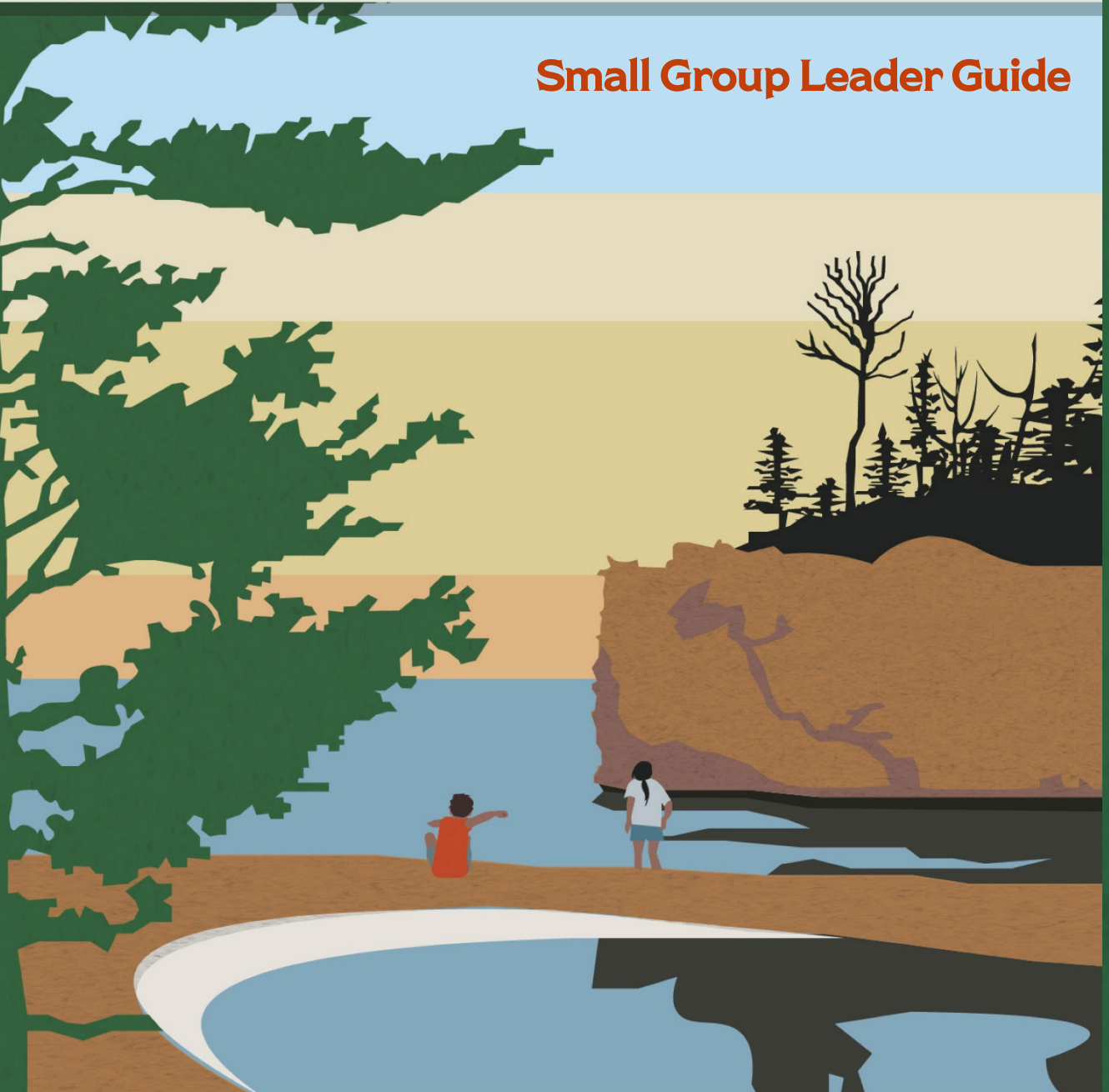


# MINNESOTA

OUR COMMON HOME

## Small Group Leader Guide



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INTEGRAL ECOLOGY  
everything is connected.

# Minnesota, Our Common Home

## Small Group Leader Guide

### Hello leaders!

Thank you for choosing to lead this small group. During the next six weeks, you will be working through *Minnesota, Our Common Home* with a group of people and discussing the material. This document was developed by the staff of the Minnesota Catholic Conference and a group of advisors to respond to Pope Francis' call in his encyclical, *Laudato si': On the care of our common home*, for an ethic of integral ecology.

We saw the encyclical as a great opportunity for the Church to rediscover the heart of what it means to be human—to be a beloved child of the Creator—and to respond to the urgent cultural challenges at hand for us as Christians: the environmental crisis, rampant atheism and technocracy, sexual promiscuity, gender identity confusion, mental health problems ... the list goes on. There was a need to translate its central messages and principles into a shorter, more accessible, and local context—Minnesota, our common home.

How do we remain rooted in hope in times like these? *Laudato si'* and *Minnesota, Our Common Home* remind us that part of the answer is to be re-awakened to the beauty, goodness, and truth found in Creation, God's first love letter to humanity. Hope comes from knowing that our ultimate destiny is found in God's plan for our lives, both now and in eternity, and from humbly receiving that plan as a gift rather than a burden or an imposition.

Our vision for your group is that each one of you might experience deeper conversion. That is what this is all about: conversion. Turning from one way of thinking and acting to another so that our priorities, our desires, and our loves reflect the truth about who we really are. Placing God more squarely on the throne of our hearts. Letting Jesus be Lord of our lives. Giving the Holy Spirit more access to our deepest selves.

If everyone in your group is closer to God at the end of these sessions, it has been a successful group regardless of anything else.

You, as a leader, have a special role in facilitating this group. You will therefore need to devote enough time—probably more than the other members in your group—to prepare the material each week. Every group is different and needs different things from their leader, so remember: good teachers teach *people*, not subjects.

Below you'll find some guidelines for starting and leading a group. We hope this leader guide will prove a helpful aid as you journey with your brothers and sisters into a deeper relationship with God.

### Before you begin ...

This is a six-week study, but we recommend that you have an introductory orientation meeting. This introductory session can be more casual, with time and space for you to get to know one another and

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distribute materials. After finishing the next six weeks, you may decide you want to meet one more time to wrap up, to pray together, or just to have fellowship with one another. You may even decide to keep meeting regularly to discuss your faith; this “small group” model is a powerful tool for building small communities of faith that support and strengthen one another.

- Set clear expectations for participation. In a group of committed members, everyone will trust each other more and be able to engage the material better. In the first group, you may consider explaining what exactly will be expected (“*We will meet here every Tuesday at 7 o’clock and be done by 8:30 ...*”) and why you think it’s important that everyone be committed. Of course, emergencies always arise, but the goal is that each person will view this group as a priority in their weekly schedule. It’s only six weeks, after all.
- Allow for 90 minutes per meeting—and try not to go over time! This leaves room for socializing and good, in-depth discussion, while respecting everyone’s time.
- There is no magic number for group size, but if the group is too big it will prevent everyone from sharing and discussing deeply. We recommend anywhere from 5-8 people per group.
- Make sure everyone has a copy of *Minnesota, Our Common Home*, and a Bible. If they don’t have a copy of the Scriptures, you can direct them to free apps they can download on their phone.

**\*Note: *Translation matters!* The USCCB has recommended use of the New American Bible, which is used in the Lectionary at Mass. We also recommend the Revised Standard Version—Catholic Edition.**

## Facilitating discussion

Everyone is different, and every group has unique dynamics. Your responsibility as the group leader is to be attentive to those dynamics and to guide discussion in a way that makes everyone feel heard and respected. One thing that might help set the tone for discussion is to ask questions and explicitly encourage sharing (but not over-sharing!). For example:

- “*Do you need more time to think before you share, or are you quick to respond?*”
- “*Is everyone okay if I call on you to share if you are a little more quiet that week?*”
- “*If you’re a talker, please be aware that we want time for everyone to share.*”
- “*Even if you don’t always share in small group settings, we really value what you have to say—everyone’s thoughts and experiences are important here!*”

Get comfortable with silence. Sometimes the quiet is an important part of a group, giving individuals time to think and prompting them to break the silence by sharing. People are usually quick to catch on if you always fill the empty space, and they will probably start looking to you to say something when no one else does. But remember that your job is to facilitate, not to always have a comment.

Try to keep the goals for the week (see below) in mind during your discussion and help everyone stay on track. Tangents will inevitably arise; some are helpful, but some will derail the conversation. This can be destructive to the rapport within your group. Be aware of ways you can tie tangents back in to the topic at hand. You may have to interrupt by saying something like, “*Okay, this is a great discussion, but we only*

*have so much time left, so let's get on to this next section.*” Or, if the conversation is fruitful and engaging, you may choose to let it be.

## Engaging the material

You can decide with the help of your group how you would like to incorporate each week's reading into your discussion. Do you want to read it ahead of time, or out loud together during the meeting? Would including longer excerpts from *Laudato si'*, other Church documents, or readings from other theologians enrich your discussion? It's up to you. Try to find a way of leading this group that works for you and allows everyone to get the most out of the discussion.

Don't be afraid to pray about where your group members are or what they need! Your role is as much about spiritual leadership as it is about practical leadership. What is resonating with your group members? Feel free to focus on that! At the same time, don't put too much pressure on yourself to fill the needs of every person. Only God can do that.

Make sure to touch base each week about the previous week's Challenge. At the beginning of your meeting, ask how it went for everyone last week. Let your group members share experiences and reflections and be prepared to tie those comments back to the lessons from the previous week's reading. If anyone is feeling discouragement over the content, be sure to encourage that person. Express gratitude for personal sharing—it's not always easy to put yourself out there in small group settings!

During group meetings, one way to break open discussion is to ask a simple, open-ended question like “*What were your first impressions of this reading?*” You are free to use the discussion questions in the Small Group Study Guide, but you are equally free *not* to do so, to use your own questions, or to discuss questions your group members have from the reading.

The content of *Minnesota, Our Common Home* has the potential to bring up a lot of hot-button issues: controversial political figures or policies, climate change, migration, contraception, abortion, gender identity, euthanasia, etc. **The goal of this small group is not to debate these topics. It is to discuss them with a sincere and shared desire for the truth and for a deeper relationship with God.** Of course, this doesn't mean you need to shy away from hard topics, but don't push the issue either if people are getting emotional or upset. If you sense that your group members will not be receptive to being challenged on their views on sexuality or politics, then don't force it. But do feel responsible to reiterate Catholic teaching on sensitive topics as a matter for the group's consideration.

Don't underestimate the power of personal follow-up if you get the impression that one of your group members was upset by something you discussed. Most people just need to know that their viewpoint has been heard.

## Week-by-week overview

**\*Note: It is strongly recommended that you read (or at least skim) the text of *Laudato si'* before your group starts meeting. This will prepare you better to answer questions and to facilitate good discussion about the encyclical.**

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## Week One: Where Is Our Hope?

The first three weeks of this group are designed to lay a foundation for the final three weeks. We start this week at the heart of the crisis, which Pope Francis says is our disordered relationship with technology—an over-reliance on science and technology to solve all our problems, and a resulting forgetfulness that God is the ultimate answer to the challenges and suffering we face in our world.

**\*Note: The “technocratic paradigm” and some of the other concepts presented in this section are challenging. It may help to read *Laudato si’*, paragraphs 106-114, if you feel you need clarification.**

## Week Two: A Crisis of Nature

Once again, this week you should be laying down some foundational concepts. A full philosophy of nature is beyond the scope of both *Minnesota, Our Common Home* and your small group, but we have tried to present the basics in the document.

The goal of this week is to recognize that the laws of nature have been put there by the Creator and that they ought to be something like a set of instructions for proper use of natural resources. As human beings, we are called to help other creatures attain the fullness of their being, not prevent them from achieving that fullness by manipulating them to serve our designs. One important distinction you will need to make in your group is between *disregard for nature’s laws* leading to destruction versus *cooperation with nature’s laws* leading to fuller expression of life. That is the difference between a master and a steward. It should be obvious that we are not called to leave nature untouched—so what are the limits of our call “to till and to keep”?

## Week Three: Made for Relationship

This week’s reading draws from the thought of Pope Saint John Paul II and relates it to a theme in *Laudato si’* that Pope Francis repeats many times: the profound interconnectedness among all things and their Creator. Relationships are a key topic for your discussion. Group members should come away having been exposed to the idea that their *mission* is secondary to their *identity* as a son or daughter of God.

Your group should also discuss ecological conversion—what it is, what it might look like practically in our lives, etc. One reason *Laudato si’* is such an important encyclical is that it emphasizes the fact that Christians cannot be indifferent to environmental concerns; the responsibility we have to care for our neighbor also applies to the earth itself. This may be a new idea that challenges the long-held beliefs of some. Patience and open conversation are key. As the group leader, continue to draw focus back to the text for support.

**\*Note: If you find the concept of ecological conversion challenging, you may want to read *Laudato si’*, paragraphs 216-218.**

## Week Four: Called to Stewardship

The focus of this week’s group should be the practical application of the past three weeks’ lessons. We have intentionally grouped natural resources and food together because there are so many simple ways to implement an ethic of stewardship in these areas. The point is to connect the dots between the idea of Christian stewardship and the secular “green movement,” highlighting how our faith has a lot to offer in

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the environmental conversation and, in turn, environmental concern need not be a distant reality for us as Catholics.

Success in this week's group means that your group members walk away feeling both challenged to live out their faith in new ways and empowered to do so.

### Week Five: An Ecological View of the Person

You would be wise to spend time in prayer before this week's meeting, asking the Holy Spirit to be present in your group and to illuminate the minds of group members. The moral questions addressed in the reading this week are heavy. They may elicit an emotional response in group members and cause tension or conflict during your discussion. Your role this week is to remain peaceful and be attentive to what everyone is saying and how the material is impacting them. Again, don't feel the need to push the issue if people are upset.

The goals for this week are to connect the teaching of *Laudato si'* to the teachings of *Humanae vitae* and other Church teaching on human sexuality and life issues, making clear the relationship between questions of the environment and questions of the human body. There is, for example, an inherent contradiction in cultural acceptance of hormonal birth control, which causes women to waste out excess estrogen into the water supply—which, supposedly, we are working so hard to keep pure of chemicals and toxins!

Don't feel pressure to see massive change in your group members from this week's discussion. If everyone takes a small step forward in their perspective, that will be a success.

### Week Six: Conclusions and Next Steps

This week's meeting is a good opportunity to let group members bring up any lingering questions or concerns they have. The main task of this final week, however, is to set concrete resolutions that will help your members keep growing after your group disbands. Use the tool included in the Small Group Study Guide to set resolutions for TODAY, THIS MONTH, and ONE YEAR FROM NOW.

This is a time to share with one another how God has worked in your lives over the past six weeks. As the group leader, you should encourage each member to share some way that they have been impacted by the group. Remember, if they weren't getting *anything* out of it, they would have stopped coming by now.

### Wrapping up

Thank you for your generous gift of time and investment to make this group possible! Now that you have finished this study of *Minnesota, Our Common Home* you might consider a few things going forward:

- Is there anyone in your group who you suspect left feeling frustrated or confused? **If so, please follow up with them as soon as possible!** It may not be your responsibility to ensure that every person agrees with everything in the document, but it *is* your responsibility to do your best to make sure that everyone feels heard and appreciated. A simple invitation to coffee or lunch can go a long way!

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- Do you sense momentum in your group to keep going—whether that is to keep meeting regularly together to discuss faith or to branch out and create new *Minnesota, Our Common Home* study groups? What practical steps do you need to take to make sure that momentum isn't lost?
- Is there anything in the document itself that you or your group found unclear or unhelpful? Please contact the staff of the Minnesota Catholic Conference to let them know how they can improve this resource! You can find contact information at the MCC website, [www.MNCatholic.org](http://www.MNCatholic.org). There is also a “Frequently Asked Questions” section, below, which has more information about the genesis and purpose of *Minnesota, Our Common Home*.

The Church is built up and strengthened by your service! May God bless you abundantly. Thank you!

## Frequently Asked Questions

What is the purpose of this document?

The intention of *Minnesota, Our Common Home* is to bring into clearer focus the central teachings of Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, *Laudato si'*. Though very readable, the encyclical is long and covers a lot of ground. We felt that taking its key messages and then translating them into a local context would help people here in Minnesota understand how *Laudato si'* and its call to integral ecology apply to their own daily lives.

Who is your intended audience?

*Minnesota, Our Common Home* is written primarily for the person in the pew. It is for people in the Church who have perhaps never considered how faith relates to the natural environment, as well as for those who want to see more clearly how our Catholic faith speaks to our responsibility to care for all of God's creation, even in the context of legislative advocacy.

At the same time, we hope that the document will also appeal to non-churchgoers who are curious about what the Catholic Church says about ecology or are surprised that She has anything to say at all. People who care deeply about the environment and want to articulate more clearly *why* we should care about it may find that *Minnesota, Our Common Home* enriches their relationship to both the Creator and His creation.

Why did you feel the need to translate *Laudato si'* into a local context?

We believe that both the increasing environmental consciousness of people everywhere and Pope Francis' encyclical are an important evangelical opportunity for the Church. Pope Francis says that the Church's activities must be understood in a missionary and evangelical framework, and that is the way in which this resource should be understood: a tool for evangelization.

We hope that by helping people better understand their relationship with creation, they will consider more deeply their relationship with the Creator. If we want others to respect the earth, we can't ignore that right relationships with the land begin with right relationships with God. Conversely, our relationship with the Creator is incomplete if we are indifferent to protecting His creation.

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Knowing Jesus and being in communion with the Blessed Trinity is the fulcrum around which everything turns. We hope more people encounter the living God through this document.

Were there particular issues in Minnesota that gave this document more urgency?

Nobody can do everything, but everyone can do something to protect creation, and if we want to counteract the many environmental, cultural, and spiritual crises we face today, we must start in our own backyard.

In recent years, Minnesota has put much focus on environmental policy. There have been high-intensity debates in our state over new pipelines, hydraulic fracking, mining projects, and water quality, to name a few. Often, these debates are framed as a zero-sum game between jobs and environmental protection, with the two sides digging in.

Similarly, there has been no shortage of controversy over difficult social questions related to marriage, sexuality, and life issues from conception until natural death.

While it may seem like these issues sit at either end of a political spectrum, they actually all bring to the forefront one key theme of discipleship: our stewardship of creation. One of the main goals of *Minnesota, Our Common Home* is to connect the dots between questions of the natural ecology and questions of the human or social ecology and root the discussion within the framework of integral ecology and right relationships.

How does this document help Catholics better understand integral ecology?

The first two sections of *Minnesota, Our Common Home* lay the groundwork for what Pope Francis talks about when he uses the term “integral ecology.” We begin with “head-level” and “heart-level” issues because, as the pope himself said, “The external deserts in the world are growing because the internal deserts have become so vast.” A strong foundation in solid theological principles is important so we can apply those principles to concrete issues. You can’t explain to others what you don’t understand yourself.

Part Three of the document offers more practical suggestions, both for home life and for public policy. It does not always give definitive answers to the challenges we are facing on a state level, but it shows how the message of *Laudato si’* can speak to us as Minnesotans in the face of challenges related to the environment, agriculture, sexuality, human life, and human nature itself.

Why should Catholics be concerned about ecology? Aren’t there bigger problems to worry about?

Because they speak to our human nature and often involve intrinsic moral evils, the “life issues” necessarily take a certain priority in the Church’s civic engagement. Yet, we would all do well to consider the public square something of a “political ecosystem,” acknowledging that no one issue stands or falls on its own. Every policy issue, from abortion to clean water, is woven into the web of relationships in which we live. If we want to be salt and light for our culture, we need a consistent ethic of life that informs how we think about every issue, rather than zeroing in on just one or two.

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The document addresses issues as diverse as environmental stewardship and gender-identity ideology. What is the connection?

Both are ultimately about restoring right relationships—with the earth and one another, but especially with God. When we are in right relationship with the Creator and have an awareness of our identity in Him and our mission to be stewards of creation—including our bodies—then our actions will receive all that comes from Him as gifts to be stewarded, not raw material to be manipulated at will. The soil, the water, our marriages—all of it; the marriage bed and the garden bed. We can then restore relationships in our communities and with the land itself.

How can I get a copy of *Minnesota, Our Common Home*?

You can download it in PDF form from MCC's website:  
[www.MNCatholic.org/OurCommonHome](http://www.MNCatholic.org/OurCommonHome). There you will also find information for ordering individual copies or in bulk.

Is it possible to use this resource in my parish, for example, in a small group?

Yes! Small group resources that accompany *Minnesota, Our Common Home* are available at [www.MNCatholic.org/OurCommonHome](http://www.MNCatholic.org/OurCommonHome).

Are there any other resources that accompany the document?

In addition to small group resources, we have an “Ecological Examen,” an extended meditation meant to facilitate deeper conversion, and homily helpers for priests who wish to preach about integral ecology or promote *Minnesota, Our Common Home* in their parishes.

Is *Minnesota, Our Common Home* a bishops' statement?

No. *Minnesota, Our Common Home* is a pastoral resource developed by the staff of the Minnesota Catholic Conference and a team of contributors. It was approved for publication by the Catholic bishops of Minnesota in December 2018.

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