Sacred Ground: Cultivating Connections Between Our Faith, Our Food, and the Climate examines how our food systems contribute to injustice and to climate change, and how our faiths call us to respond through practical solutions.

In the beginning...

Creation stories from many religious traditions center around gardens and soil. In Abrahamic traditions God made humans from dust, and placed them in the Garden of Eden to tend and keep it. A common North American Indigenous creation story tells how Turtle Island (North America) was created when soil was placed on the back of a turtle.

Humans have lived in close connection with the soil for thousands of years. Some cultures flourished by living in harmony with nature, taking only what they needed, and preserving the soil so that it could continue to nourish them. North American indigenous cultures grew their food using principles that have been adopted as conservation practices today. We acknowledge all food grown here is grown on formerly native lands.

Connecting the dots to the present...

Modern industrial agriculture practices have allowed us to grow food more abundantly and cheaply than ever before, but at the cost of the health of our soil. Tilling and chemical inputs degrade the soil, inhibiting its ability to hold water and carbon. This leads to erosion and desertification, releasing carbon into the atmosphere contributing to climate change. And in a vicious cycle - extreme weather events due to climate change make it harder for our farmers to grow food. According to the United Nations two-thirds of the world is desertifying and the world's remaining topsoil will be gone in 60 years unless we find a way to save our soil.

Intersecting challenges...

The worst impacts of the climate crisis in the United States are felt by Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), and low-income communities, in the form of increased floods, droughts, fires, and heat deaths. These communities also often lack access to fresh, healthy, affordable food in their neighborhoods. According to the USDA millions of people live in these areas, called Food Deserts. Conversely, food justice is when all have access to fresh and nutritious food as an inherent human right. The fight for food justice seeks to address structural barriers to that right.

Food injustice, climate injustice, and racial injustice are all intertwining threats with particular impact on BIPOC and low-income communities. We at IPL maintain our value that because we embrace justice, we act with inclusion and respect, and we work in solidarity with vulnerable and marginalized communities. We support climate solutions that connect the dots between the intersecting challenges of racial justice and food justice.
Connect the dots to the future…
Healthy soil helps solve the climate crisis. Using conservation practices to grow our food restores the carbon balance by reducing carbon loss from the soil and drawing down carbon from the atmosphere where it is a problem, putting it in the soil where it is a solution. Many exemplary farmers are already farming for Creation by caring for the soil. Our health and the health of the soil are connected. Healthy soil leads to healthy humans and animals, healthy water, and healthy climate.

Food and Faith…
Food is an important part of our faith traditions – we use it to express our connection to each other, to the earth, and to our spirituality. Our traditions have certain beliefs about food, we use food symbolically in our liturgies, and various faith traditions require specific food practices in the daily lives of their believers. And all the major faith traditions call us to care for the earth. So how we grow our food is integral to the way we care for the earth and each other as religious people.

Study your tradition’s faith statement on food and agriculture in your congregational discussions during Faith Climate Action Week. Find them here: bit.ly/faithfoodclimate IPL has compiled a list of suggested study resources for Sacred Ground at this link: bit.ly/foodnfaith

Learn…
Did you know there are more microbes in a teaspoon of healthy soil than there are people on the planet? These microbes are an important part of the natural system that draws carbon down out of the atmosphere and into the ground where it belongs. Food growing practices that conserve or regenerate the soil support the health of these tiny creatures and the system they are part of. Some of the practices include: no tilling or chemicals, integrating animals into the farm, using compost for fertilizer, and rotating diverse crops to avoid pests. Keeping the soil covered with growing plants or trampled plants with living roots all year round feeds the microorganisms that build the carbon in the soil. These practices increase water retention providing a buffer against drought and flooding. To learn more, include a screening of this year’s feature film Kiss the Ground, in your event planning. Find screening information in this guide.
Here are a few short films on how healthy soil can restore the carbon balance:

**Soil Solutions**, 4 mins, Center for Food Safety. Michael Pollan, food writer, narrates this simple and beautiful explanation of how soil sequesters carbon. soilsolution.org/watch-the-film/

**The Soil Story**, 3 mins, Kiss the Ground. Pashon Murray, urban farmer, of Detroit narrates this story of soil and its potential to reverse climate change. bit.ly/3m79YOU

You can cultivate Sacred Ground by learning some of these practices for your garden at home or in a community or congregational garden. Here are a few of the resources to get you started:

- **5 Ways to Make Your Garden Regenerative**, 2-minute video, Kiss the Ground. bit.ly/37rw8aa
- Instructional videos from Kiss the Ground, kissetheground.com/videos/
- Illinois IPL affiliate, Faith in Place supported this garden: bit.ly/FiPCarr

**Act...**

Since we all purchase food, we all have the opportunity to influence how our food is grown. Consider these three options for action for you and your congregation.*

**INFLUENCE** Purchase your food from local growers and ask them about their soil practices. Use the questions on the enclosed wallet guide to select food grown in healthy soil. You can influence local growers’ practices with your preferences, especially if you can connect them to a larger market like your congregation. Find growers at localharvest.org. Find Black Farmers here: bit.ly/black-farmers and bit.ly/Blackownedfarms. Once you find a local grower that practices soil conservation, or is willing to start, host a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) where congregants sign up to purchase from a local grower and pick up a box of produce each week at your congregation. Invite your congregation to pledge to purchase from a local grower during Faith Climate Action Week. Download a longer purchasing guide: kissetheground.com/purchasingguide/
SUPPORT Adopt an existing community garden in your area to support food justice. Do they need funds for tools or seeds or compost? Do they need more volunteers? Do they need land and does your congregation have land to share? Can you offer to connect them with local expertise on growing healthy soil? Are they selling the produce they grow and can you connect them with a market? Supporting an existing garden builds relationships that help strengthen community.

GROW Start a new food garden to support food justice. Do it in partnership with other congregations or community organizations to ensure the garden has plenty of volunteers. Incorporate soil conservation practices in the garden. The garden could be on your congregation’s property or on the property of a partner congregation. The produce from the garden could be used for programming, given away to the community, or donated to a food bank. In addition, individuals living in food deserts could rent plots to grow food for their families and sell to their community. Perhaps this could lead to a new kind of CSA: “Congregational Supported Agriculture”.

IPL affiliate in Illinois, Faith in Place, has started several of these gardens to relieve food deserts and create jobs. Read more and download their guide to start your own here: bit.ly/FiPgarden. Contact your state IPL to see if they do food work. Your state university extension office may have resources also. Here’s a comprehensive guide that helped many gardens get started in Iowa, Community Garden Start Up Guide, Iowa State University Extension: bit.ly/extensionhelp.

Cultivating Sacred Ground supports food justice, nourishes healthy soil, and can help restore the carbon balance. We can act as individuals and congregations, and we must also act collectively to influence legislation that creates food systems that are just, equitable, and sustainable. Join IPL to make your voice heard on these issues in the spring of 2021. Action will be posted here: bit.ly/IPLAction.

*Outside work in gardens can be COVID-safe. Wear masks and garden gloves, stay 6 ft apart, and wash hands. Bring your own tools and water to drink.
(Photos are from IPL affiliates.)