



**North/West Lower
Michigan Synod**

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2024 Synod Assembly

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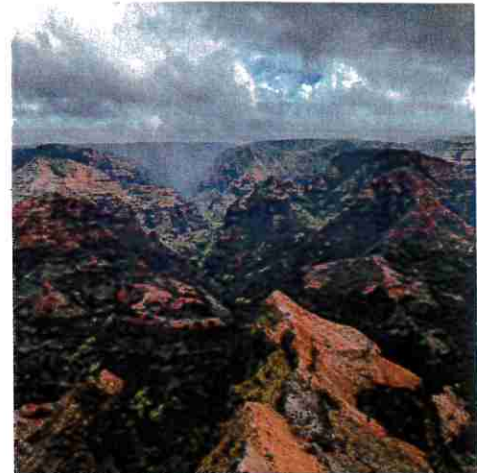
Congregations in Transition

"Mālama ka 'aina"

In the Hawaiian language, the phrase "Mālama ka 'aina" means to take care of the land. Hawaiians, to this day, love, preserve, and protect the land as the source of their living. Hawaiians believe that, if we take care of the land, the land will take care of us. A related phrase, "Mālama Honua," means to take care of the earth. When we protect the planet, we keep it well for future generations.

My family and I learned the concept of "Mālama ka 'aina" as we explored the islands. We were asked not to litter and to stay on the trails, keep our distance from wildlife, and make certain there were no seeds on our shoes that could take root and threaten plants endemic to Hawaii. Mostly, we were invited to consider the islands and the ocean that surrounds and connects them as sacred.

There are few places in the modern world in which the connection between humankind, myth, and nature is more obvious than Hawaii. More than a relic of Hawaii's distant past, Hawaiian mythology is a very present spiritual belief among many of the islands' indigenous people. As noted historian Herb Kawainui Kane stated in the PBS series, *The Hawaiians*, island natives believed that, "The entire universe was an orderly, fixed whole in which all the parts were integral to the whole, including man himself. Man was descended from the Gods, but so were the rocks, so were the animals, so were the fish. Thus man had to regard the rocks, the fish and the birds as his relatives."



Waimea Canyon, Kauai



Poipu Beach, Kauai

In Hawaiian mythology, the islands and ocean provide unmistakable evidence of the gods. Pele is the goddess of fire and volcano; Namaka is the goddess of water and the sea—and waves. Laka, the goddess of the forest who enriches the plants with light, is best known for creating the beautiful Hawaiian hula dance. Seen most recently in Disney's *Moana*, Maui is a demigod and the god of the sun. When the sun rose and set too quickly, Maui tamed it and extended the length of a day so people could have longer days to work. Yet, my favorite is Kamohoalii, the chief deity among the shark gods, who is revered for his role in guiding ancient Polynesian travelers to Hawaii, leading lost ships to safety, and protecting sailors. For a lighthearted appreciation of Hawaiian mythology, pay attention to the ocean in Disney's *Moana*. For something more substantial, read Chapter 2 of James Michener's novel *Hawaii*.

These goddesses and gods, and several more, are connected to particular places in Hawaii. For example, on the island of Kauai, Pele dug into the earth and formed a hill called Pu'uoupele or "the hill of Pele." We understand associating places with the divine, at least in theory. In the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament, Jacob called the place where he wrestled with the angel Peniel "face of God," because he saw God face-to-face and his life was

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preserved (Genesis 32:30). Many pilgrims to the Holy Land report they experience Jesus's presence most acutely not in church buildings, but in natural places, including the Jordan River, Sea of Galilee, Mount of Olives, and Garden of Gethsemane.

Yet, these Biblical locations are far away; connecting to the places Jesus lived, taught, suffered, died, and rose requires either study or pilgrimage. So, here at home, we experience Jesus in church buildings, which are a step removed from nature and creation. If we are honest with ourselves, we subtly discourage people from experiencing Jesus in nature and creation, out of fear that, if people genuinely experience Jesus in nature, they may not return to our church buildings.

How much we want to care for and protect our church buildings! Rather than sacrificially caring for the land, so the land will take care of us, by asking how many buildings the church actually needs, we endeavor to make our buildings more hospitable to the planet through green teams and solar panels. These are certainly worthwhile undertakings that, of course, deserve to be lauded. Nevertheless, I return from Hawaii wondering what would happen if we strove to recover the sacredness of creation rather than confining Jesus and our appreciation of sacred space to our buildings. What kind of impact would we have if "Mālama ka 'aina" became an integral part of our spirituality?

How might we cultivate this Hawaiian (and Native American) spiritual perspective? Earth Day is April 22. Perhaps we could use this day and month to put some plans in place for the summer. Here are four ideas:

- First, let's get out of our buildings at least one Sunday this summer. I'm not thinking of folding chairs on the church's front lawn. Let's go to the beach. Let's go to the park. Let's go into the woods. I seem to recall that, once upon a time, Immanuel in Suttons Bay held Easter sunrise worship in a cherry orchard; perhaps they still do. Our Ludington and Muskegon congregations used to worship on the beach. St. Paul's in Alpena worships on the shore of Lake Superior. Forty years ago, as an intern, I spent some summer Sundays leading worship at Trinity/Midland's camp.

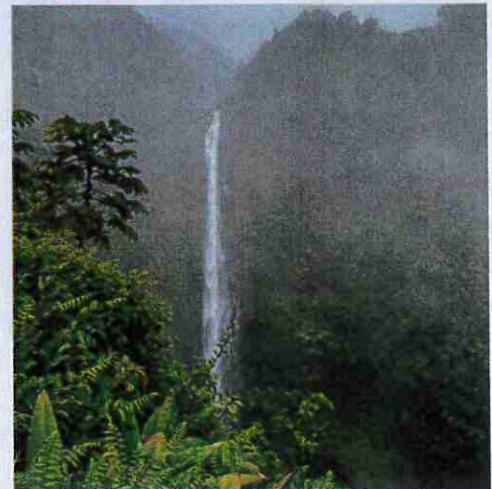
Perhaps being locked out of our church buildings during the pandemic has made us determined never to leave them again. People remind me that Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues and that Jesus taught in the temple in Jerusalem. That's true. Jesus also taught in a boat on the sea of Galilee and on a mountain (as in Sermon on the Mount). Jesus also prayed on a mountain, in a garden, and at a river. We can leave our building; our building will be there when we come back. I acknowledge that this is easier for me to say because I do not have a single church building that I call home.



Laniakea Beach, Oahu

Keep worship simple when you venture out into nature. As obvious as it sounds, don't attempt to re-create indoor worship outdoors. People and the word are all we really need to worship. Read a story about Jesus spending time in nature, ideally a story that is appropriate for the location. We can sing and pray things we know by heart. Don't bring books. Don't make bulletins. Some water for remembering baptism might be lovely; consider using the water that's there. Some bread and wine might be nice, but it's not necessary. I suggest some silence or guided meditation that provides space to experience the triune God in the setting.

- Second, let's encourage our people to spend time in nature this summer; to do this, we may need to give them permission not to show up at the church building once or twice, though they can certainly send their envelope. I spend some of my holiest summer Sunday mornings sitting at the end of my dock or standing waist deep in lake water praying. I have spent time with God on the same lake for more than 60 years; it is such a sacred place to me that Cathy and I have a cabin there that I call the cathedral. Wouldn't it be neat to have a map of Michigan where people could put post-it notes at the places they experienced God in nature this summer.



Akaka Falls, Hawai'i