

MDIV STUDENT EXPLORES THEOLOGY AND CREATION

Ever since he can remember senior MDiv student Richard Hanlon has loved nature. When he was little, Rich would take his bug catcher and a jar and scour the community looking for insects. One Christmas he asked his relatives for birding books and received about 20!

Rich pursued his passion for understanding and interacting in the natural world while earning his degree in environmental studies and biology from Penn State Altoona. During his college years, he began to explore the connections between theology and creation.

After graduation he and his wife, Erin, got married and moved to Hollidaysburg, Pa., where he joined The United Methodist Church. Soon, the pastors discovered his passion for understanding and teaching about the natural world and they asked him to start a small group. He agreed, and the group wrestled with the question “How do we integrate how we care for the natural world with how we live out our faith?” It was here, while looking for God’s symbolism in nature that something more began brewing.

“I always thought I was going to be a naturalist, leading hikes and such, but once I got involved with the church I began to think there was more to this,” he says.

Rich felt the call toward ministry, but looked at every job in the church except pastor. It took his wife Erin saying to him that he should think about pastoral ministry. One confirmation after another, he decided to pursue it, but the passion for God’s creation has never left him.

“Being responsible for the natural world is more than just something to preach about. It is how I should be living my life. To be fully human, as Jesus, is to be in right relationship not only with God and other humans but also with the rest of creation. So it is theologically significant when a church takes care of the world,” he says.

Rich seeks not only to be living his life accountable to the natural world but also to find ways of encouraging others to do the same in their desire to faithfulness. At his current placement at Hot Metal Bridge Faith Community—a church plant started by PTS alums—he is leading bird watching nature tours around the city.

“Nature is a symbol and reality of God’s ongoing creation, and we are invited to participate with God in that new creation.”

Written September 2014



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