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## Book Review: Walking Gently on the Earth

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# WALKING GENTLY ON THE EARTH

by Guest Blogger April 15, 2011

REVIEW BY MELANIE SPRING MOCK

WALKING GENTLY ON THE EARTH: MAKING FAITHFUL CHOICES ABOUT FOOD, ENERGY, SHELTER AND MORE, BY LISA GRAHAM MCMINN AND MEGAN NEFF (INTERVARSITY PRESS, 2010)

*This review first appeared in [Issue 19: Sustaining](#).*

Several years ago, the local book group I attend was analyzing one of those currently popular book-length manifestos about food, in which the aggressively dogmatic author argues that people should eat locally grown produce, avoid meat products, and make far more sustainable choices about what's for dinner.

**I left my book group's discussion feeling utterly discouraged**, certain my decision to buy granola bars—rather than making them from raw oats and honey I harvested from my own bees—was destroying not only my sons' health, but the very well-being of our planet, too. This has been my problem with most recent books on sustainability: those I've attempted to read leave me feeling extraordinarily guilty, as if I can't really care about the earth until I change all my habits, buy some backyard chickens, and give up my once-a-year Burger King treat.

**The thing is, I want to make environmentally sound choices:** but as a working mother with a moderate income, a barren yard, and poor cooking skills, books about sustainability have often been far too overwhelming in their advice, and far too judgmental in their tone.

**For that reason, I approached [Walking Gently on the Earth](#) with a healthy sense of skepticism, ready to be preached at again regarding the choices I've made about my family and lifestyle.** Yet a few pages into Lisa Graham McMinn's new book, I knew this exploration of sustainability would be different: more gentle, as the title itself suggests. McMinn, along with her daughter and co-writer Megan Anna Neff, examines the ways we can more readily nurture "God's good gift"—that is, the earth and everything in it—through what McMinn calls "an ethic of care." Although McMinn and Neff challenge readers to be more considerate of the earth and its people, their challenge is measured by the sense that living sustainably should not create a heavy burden to be suffered through, but instead provide a richer existence, one worth celebrating.

**This message of hope alone separates [Walking Gently on the Earth](#) from other harsher eco-books now in circulation.** In many ways, McMinn and Neff cover ground that will be familiar to those who have read widely in sustainability. Chapters on the destruction wrought by contemporary agribusiness, the need

for alternative farming methods, and the importance of eating locally produced food that is primarily vegetable-based echo the work of Michael Pollan and (perhaps more implicitly) Wendell Berry.

**Yet while Pollan focuses his research almost solely on food and eating, *Walking Gently on the Earth* provides a much more expansive view of sustainability;** McMinn and Neff also explore the ways our purchasing decisions, our use of nonrenewable energy sources, and our choices about family size inevitably impact the globe and its people. Still, it is the evangelical Christian lens both McMinn and Neff carry to the subject of sustainability that distinguishes their book from others in the genre. McMinn admits in her introduction that discussions about the environment are often difficult in evangelical circles, where “Earth has been seen as God’s gift to sustain us until we reach our final destination, where a new heaven and earth await. This separation of the spiritual from the physical has meant that we’ve sometimes pitted caring for creation against caring for people.” **As McMinn rightly argues, though, given the precarious nature of our planet, the limited resources available to us, the byproducts of overpopulation and overconsumption, caring for people means that Christians must also care for the planet that allows us to live.**

*Walking Gently on the Earth* works hard at reframing the argument for sustainability with this core principle in mind—and in doing so, makes a much more compelling case that Christians will need to consider how their choices about food, energy, and material goods influence the well-being of all God’s children.

The “preludes” Neff provides for each chapter help to connect the practical aspects of the book’s message to the stories of people struggling to survive in the global community. In a chapter on consumerism and the marketplace, for example, Neff’s prelude narrates her experiences in a busy Thai market, where she encounters a girl begging. The dissonance—a hungry child in the midst of so much commerce—compels Neff to ask some challenging questions about her own consumerism, her Western wealth, and the ways her purchasing choices might in some way affect children like this one girl.

**Neff’s preludes do well to humanize the message the book carries:** that we need to more intentionally consider how our own life choices might affect the least of these about whom Neff writes. Perhaps the most compelling piece of *Walking Gently on the Earth*—and its most controversial—has to do with the ways our own choices about family size might also impact the planet.

**Family planning may be considered off-limits for discussion by some Christians, but McMinn argues that these are discussions Christians very much need to have, especially if they want to consider sharing the earth’s resources now—and in the future.** McMinn considers the radiating impact a large family might have on the world, showing how large families who beget large families consume significant resources. And thus, in addition to limiting our dependence on oil, eating lower on the food chain, and buying

fewer goods, we may need to limit the size of our families if we want future generations in the United States and elsewhere to survive. It is here, in their discussion on family planning, where McMinn and Neff most earn my respect.

**Rather than resorting to simplistic sustainable solutions like growing a garden, recycling, and buying locally, McMinn and Neff grapple with the complex issues that complicate our ability to care for the earth and its people.** They acknowledge that there are no easy answers, and that they often fall short of their own ideals. But, *Walking Gently on the Earth* also provides the hope that we can all do a little more to work toward shalom: “that is, the perfection of God’s creation, universal flourishing, wholeness, peace.” Such is a goal to which I can readily aspire, even if I continue to buy—rather than make—the granola bars my family eats.

**Melanie Springer Mock** writes: "I am a professor of English at George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon. My essays and reviews have appeared in *The Nation*, *Christian Feminism Today*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Mennonite World Review*, among other places. My most recent book is *Meant to Be*, forthcoming from Chalice Press. I blog about (and deconstruct) images of women embedded in evangelical popular culture at [AintIAWomanblog.net](http://AintIAWomanblog.net). Despite my vocation, I’m not always a bookish person, and like watching bad reality television, running, eating junk food, and taking long naps, under my desk if necessary."