



Oscar González

Communication

Engaging the Evangelicals of Peru in Creation Care

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Peru is a country that has great biodiversity and huge environmental problems. It also has a growing population of evangelicals, some in rural communities close to important conservation areas. In this communication, I describe how I encourage evangelical groups to participate in creation care, providing both reasons and paths for creation care and responses to opposition.

The Challenge

Peru has one of the highest species densities in the world. Its complex geography includes coastal deserts, the Andean mountains, and the Amazon rainforest. It is the fifth country in the world in terms of biodiversity richness, with up to 1,840 bird species and 17,000 flora species, and it harbors 13% of the Amazon rainforest.¹ However, this country is also part of the underdeveloped world: 40% of the population is considered to be poor. Poverty forces people to over-exploit natural resources, leading to land damage, pollution, and species extinction. According to the National Census of 2007, the majority of Peruvians are Roman Catholic (81.5%), with a percentage of evangelical Protestants (12.5%) that has almost doubled since 1993.² As many of these Catholic and evangelical communities live close to important natural areas, their participation in the conservation process is vital.

Evangelical Christians in particular are gaining political clout in the country, rising in power in rural areas where the system of living in community in small towns is quite strong.³ Evangelical

churches are tightly woven, and they usually help each other in their community. In some areas of the country, evangelicals are in the majority, and in these areas, even the authorities are evangelical.⁴ Many of these areas are also close to ecosystems that are protected.

The evangelical communities have sometimes clashed with the national authorities that manage protected areas.⁵ Not all evangelicals are aware of or convinced of the current challenges to the environment. For an individual or group to act, it is necessary to look not only to knowledge, but also to the belief system as a moral trigger. If nature conservation is what one's ethics or religion requires, then the individual or group can be convinced and moved to action.⁶

In Christianity, God is the Creator and Sustainer of nature. God gave it to human beings, who are part of the creation, to administrate it. Christianity, therefore, can be a consistent source for environmental ethics.⁷ Conservationists have begun to acknowledge this value of religions as a key source of ethics toward nature for people all over the world. The World Wildlife Fund and Conservation International promoted outreach with some religious leaders and involved them in the conservation of sacred spaces that can preserve ecosystems.⁸

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Edward O. Wilson, in his book *The Creation*, calls evangelical church leaders to join scientists and conservationists, recognizing the power of the pastors in guiding their people toward a better way of life, which also implies a healthy environment.⁹

Christianity and Creation Care

Christian communities may disregard nature conservation due to having a wrong idea, that the natural world is bad and opposed to spiritual matters. This view can be tragically combined with a misinterpretation of Gen. 1:26–28¹⁰ as a commandment to extract and deplete everything that is in nature. Herein lies, according to Lynn White, the “root of our environmental crisis.”¹¹ His thesis has been thoughtfully considered and critiqued in this journal. Others as well have rebutted White, showing that the Bible does not justify the destruction of nature.¹² The mandate “to subdue the earth” has to be seen in the context of the task that God also gave to the first man (following the Genesis story), to “till and care for the garden.” Theologians have developed the doctrine of “creation care,” reinterpreting this verse. The verb translated as “subdue” in Gen. 1:28 comes from the Hebrew verb “*shamar*,” which means, in a broader sense, “to keep and care for.”¹³

When they study the Bible, most modern-day Catholics, mainline Protestants, Orthodox Christians, and evangelicals are able to agree that God is the Creator and that humans should take care of the earth.¹⁴ The Bible implies stewardship of the earth; this can be seen in several biblical texts that refer to nature. Caring for creation was implied before Christ, in the Jewish laws to administer the use of the land, plants, and animals.¹⁵ Not only have theologians sponsored creation care, but many scientists that are evangelicals also stand for this doctrine.¹⁶ Creation care is a doctrine of common ground between different Christian traditions.

Creation care or responsible stewardship of creation recognizes that conservation of nature is a commandment for Christians. God created human beings and made them responsible for managing the rest of the creation. In this view, human beings are not the owner of the creation but rather stewards who must be accountable for how they manage the

land and its creatures. Thus, biodiversity conservation could be seen as creation care in action. Creation care argues that the Bible says that God creates and sustains life on the planet, that humanity is created in God’s image and is charged to care for the rest of his creatures, and that everything that was created is good. According to this line of theological thought, when creation care is neglected, environmental problems will come as a consequence of that sin. However, restoration of a healthy relationship between humanity and the environment is possible if there is repentance.¹⁷

Opposition to Creation Care

In the Peruvian context, there are certain doctrinal positions that, in some cases, make the evangelical communities decide not to embrace the creation care doctrine.

A. Liberation Theology and Social Justice

In Latin America, liberation theology, which originated in Peru,¹⁸ was popular in the mid-twentieth century. In some countries, such as El Salvador, this religious position cost many their lives.¹⁹ It appeared at a time when socialist and communist movements started to confront the social order, and progressive Catholics embraced it. Eventually, the preferential option for the poor became part of the Roman Catholic Church’s official doctrine. However, the poor keep destroying the natural resources that they need. There has not been an emphasis on a sustainable use of nature within this doctrine. Its agenda is to get political power to do justice in the name of the poor, but it is not clear how the poor should manage their environment to come out of poverty. Although, in and of itself, it is considered a challenge to an evangelical position because the emphasis is not on salvation by Jesus Christ, but on getting social justice,²⁰ some pastors who are sympathetic to liberation theology think that environmental problems may be a justification to get into local politics.²¹

B. Prosperity Gospel

This doctrine, although its roots are in evangelical movements, is rejected as heresy by mainline evangelicals.²² It claims that God’s will is that Christians

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should be rich and that poverty is a sin and a symbol of lack of faith. People are pressured to give money to their churches so that they will be blessed later.²³ For people that adhere to this view, nature is not considered important, only a resource to be depleted. Here it is possible that there are cases of corruption by mismanagement of money. It is better to avoid these groups if there is evidence that they think in this way; they would not care about nature conservation.

C. Spiritualizing the Material World

Present in some Pentecostal and charismatic groups, this view proffers an extreme dualism of matter and spirit, therefore nature, as part of the nonspiritual world, is not valuable for them. Other positions that adhere to spiritualizing the material world include the denial of climate change and other scientific predictions,²⁴ and force a duality of science against religion. They may reject creation care because it sounds “scientific” or “not creationist.” Due to the fact that some New Age movements support nature conservation, these evangelicals cannot tell New Age environmentalists apart from Christians or other people that support creation care.²⁵ With people who think like this, it is necessary to explain that creation care comes from the Bible, not from any alien doctrine, and is independent of any position related to origins.

D. Deep Ecology in Shamanist Culture

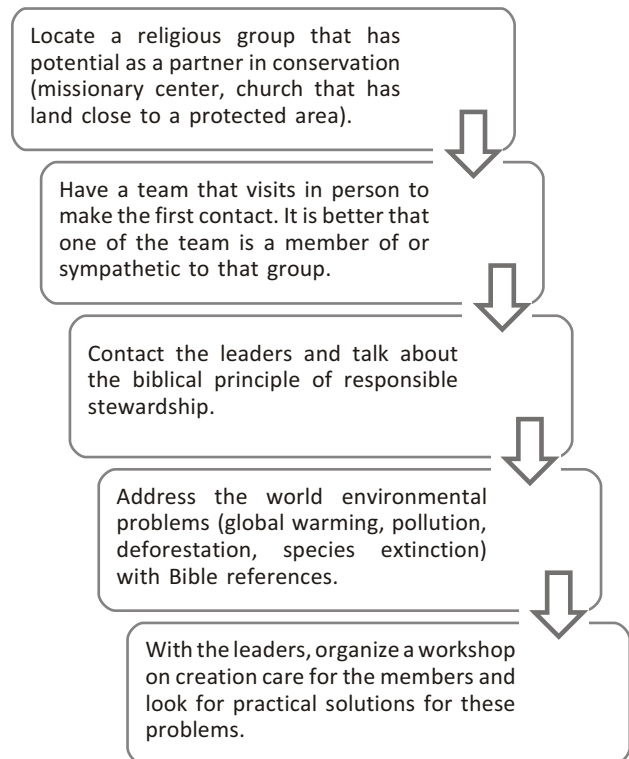
Before the Spaniards came to Peru, the Incas and other cultures that were subdued by them adored the sun, stars, and land. The land was the goddess to whom they had to pay homage.²⁶ Some people are restoring these ancient beliefs and therefore have a mystical approach to the land. There are Andean communities that have mixed these ancient religious practices with Catholic traditions as part of the “popular religion.”²⁷ Evangelicals who have come out of this context in the Andes may think that creation care is a way to worship the goddess of the land. But worshipping the land does not necessarily imply its conservation. Local communities that practice these mixed rituals have destroyed native forests and overgrazed native pastures.

Approach to Evangelical Communities and Institutions

I have been promoting creation care in Peru since 1994, when I collaborated to publish a book with a group of Peruvian evangelicals gathered by the National Council of Peruvian evangelicals (at that time the only association that represented the main evangelical denominations in Peru). The book explained the theoretical framework of why a Christian should preserve the environment.²⁸ Since then, very few attempts have been made to approach churches to involve them in conservation.²⁹ Until 2003, there was not any national or international group pursuing this.³⁰

To establish a link between a Christian community or institution and a natural protected area with wildlife or a specific natural place in an urban zone, I recommend a helpful process based on my experience as an environmental educator and conservation biologist in Peru (figure 1).

Figure 1. Process to approach religious groups based on the creation care principle.



This approach has been used in different cities and towns throughout the country between 2004 and 2009, when I visited thirteen evangelical groups and one governmental institution (table 1) for various reasons, but mainly to do particular research in the specific environment where the city was located (for example, Oxapampa, to study the montane rainforest). However, I also used the opportunity to approach groups to talk about creation care to con-

serve the native environment where the community is located. I approached the majority of them using the process of figure 1. Several groups welcomed the idea of creation care and the response of some members or the leader of the group was to start a conservation plan such as courses, field trips, or participation in reforestation projects. However, some of them were indifferent and one denied any responsibility for creation care.

Table 1. Presentations on Creation Care to Christian Groups and Institutions in Peru

| Year | City and Environment of Interest | Churches and / or Institutions | People Reached (approx.) | Response of the Group Following Presentation |
|------|-----------------------------------|--|--------------------------|---|
| 2004 | Lima (coastal wetlands) | Christian and Missionary Alliance | 120 | Field trip to a protected wetland |
| 2004 | Lima (coastal wetlands) | Lutheran Church “Cristo Rey” | 60 | Proposal of field trip with children |
| 2005 | Lima (coastal wetlands) | Education College “Diego Thompson” | 250 | No response |
| 2006 | Lima (coastal wetlands) | Light Educational Ministries | 0 | Presentation denied |
| 2006 | Juanjui (lowland rainforest) | Christian and Missionary Alliance | 40 | Youth of the church involved in the conservation program of Rio Abiseo National Park |
| 2006 | Lima (coastal wetlands) | Theological Seminary of the Christian and Missionary Alliance | 150 | New course in the seminary: “Ecology and Christianity” |
| 2007 | Lima (coastal wetlands) | Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church | 15 | No response |
| 2007 | Oxapampa (montane rainforest) | Christian and Missionary Alliance | 35 | Proposal of field trip with children to Yanachaga National Park |
| 2008 | Lima (coastal wetlands) | Faculty of Theology of the Alliance Church | 25 | No response |
| 2008 | Ica (dry mesquite forest) | <i>Iglesia Apostólica Profética de Jesucristo</i> (Guadalupe) | 72 | Youth trained to do a reforestation program |
| 2008 | Ica (dry mesquite forest) | <i>Iglesia Cristo Redentor</i> (Yaurilla) | 15 | Youth trained to do a reforestation program |
| 2008 | Ica (dry mesquite forest) | <i>Iglesia El Aposento Alto</i> (La Venta) | 62 | Youth trained to do a reforestation program |
| 2008 | Tarapoto (lowland rainforest) | Institute of Natural Resources, course for park rangers of the Peruvian National Park system | 45 | Strategy to reach churches that impact in protected land of the Peruvian National Park system |
| 2009 | Ayacucho (high Andean ecosystems) | Bible United Society | 50 | Booklet “Called for Caring God’s Creation” |

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Positive Outcomes of Introducing Creation Care

Although there is still some opposition, several creation care initiatives are now being carried out by evangelical churches. Institutions such as The Evangelical Environmental Network³¹ are working to raise environmental awareness in evangelical churches worldwide. In Peru, even though I have met with some prejudices and indifference, nongovernmental associations such as A Rocha Peru, affiliated with A Rocha International,³² have been working since 2004 to approach evangelical churches and to encourage their taking part in creation care. This opens a door to cooperation between evangelical churches and conservation organizations. This is very important because within the nonreligious community of conservationists, there are people reluctant to work with Christians. Evangelicals are seen as intolerant, ignorant, and deniers of scientific principles such as evolution.³³ The dualism of science and religion is a myth that too often is believed by both sides.

Outcomes of creation care have been more than just a sermon. In some places it has meant the creation of church conservation committees, which look into the sustainability of the church building and the environment around it. A pastor that is aware of creation care may incorporate nature appreciation into worship services, looking at some Psalms that describe the beauty of creation.³⁴ The church that believes that creation care is an integral part of its ministry will educate children and adults in conservation, in Sunday school, or at other study meetings. Later, there will be personal commitments of church members to get involved in conservation activities.



Youth of the CMA church visiting a wetland in the coast of Lima

The positive results of creation care in the stewardship of the Chesapeake Bay (USA)³⁵ might in some ways be duplicated in Peru and other Latin American countries. The positive outcomes of creation care were suggested in a joint publication to Christian leaders, stressing that nature conservation is part of the church's mission.³⁶ Theological seminars for pastoral training have been formed for creation care through invited lectures and even courses, and some evangelical churches of different denominations have instituted creation care training and activities (see table 1).

The introduction of the creation care doctrine to evangelical churches in Peru helps them to more closely follow the implications of the gospel, such as cooperating in conservation projects. ¶

Acknowledgment

I am thankful to Stella Tippin who helped in the English version of this document.

Notes

¹Detailed information is given in <http://www.biodiversitya-z.org/areas/26> and in R. A. Mittermeier, P. R. Gil, and C. G. Mittermeier, *Megadiversity: Earth's Biologically Wealthiest Nations* (Monterrey, Mexico: Conservation International, Cemex, 1997).

²Precise statistics about social parameters of poverty, religious affiliation, and other topics in Peru were taken from data published in *Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática (INEI). Sistema de indicadores de pobreza: Peru en cifras* (Lima: INEI, 2008).

³Tomas Gutierrez, *Evangelicos, democracia y sociedad* (Lima: Editorial Linea Andina, 2005).

⁴Dario Lopez and Victor Arroyo, *Tejiendo un nuevo rostro publico: Evangélicos, sociedad y política en el Peru contemporáneo* (Lima: Instituto de Ciencias Políticas "Nueva Humanidad" and Ediciones Puma, 2010).

⁵Once, a chief of a national park in the Amazon forest wanted my participation as a speaker in a training course to their rangers on how to deal with evangelical groups, explaining creation care to them. He said that when the rangers approached these religious communities asking them not to log and not to hunt in the protected area, they responded: "God gave us this land for our benefit! We have the right to subdue it!"

⁶Conservation biology textbooks do agree that morality systems and religious values could be a positive influence on conservation action. See C. Anne Claus, Kai M. A. Chan, and Terre Satterfield, "The Roles of People in Conservation," in Navjot S. Sodhi and Paul Ehrlich, *Conservation Biology for All* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 262–339; and Fred

- Van Dyke, *Conservation Biology: Foundations, Concepts, Applications* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2003), chap. 3.
- ⁷K. O'Brien, *An Ethics of Biodiversity: Christianity, Ecology and the Variety of Life* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010).
- ⁸See <http://www.arcworld.org/>.
- ⁹Edward O. Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).
- ¹⁰Genesis 1:26–28 says:
Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."
- ¹¹Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–7.
- ¹²Some prominent responses are done by Robert Booth Fowler, *The Greening of Protestant Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) and Raymond J. Berry, ed., *The Care of Creation* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000).
- ¹³The Evangelical Environmental Network gives a very good source for the concept and application of creation care. See www.creationcare.org.
- ¹⁴Good sources are the books of E. Breuilly and M. Palmer, *Christianity and Ecology* (London: WWF, Cassell Publishing, 1992); D. T. Hessel and R. R. Ruether, *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press for the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000); and Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008).
- ¹⁵A version of the Bible which has highlighted (in green) the references to nature, and has comments by respected Christian leaders of different denominations on why Christians should conserve it, is the "Green Bible" by Harper Bibles (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).
- ¹⁶Ghilleen T. Prance, *Earth under Threat* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 1996); and Calvin B. DeWitt, "Preparing the Way for Action," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 46, no. 2 (1994): 80–9.
- ¹⁷Some Bible verses to back up the creation care doctrine are Isa. 45:12; Gen. 1:27; Gen. 2:15; Gen. 1:31; Exod. 23:10–11, Isa. 24:5–6; Jer. 23:10; Gen. 3:17–18; and 2 Chron. 7:14. A very good modern interpretation for these verses in the environmental context is given by Calvin B. DeWitt, *Caring for Creation: Responsible Stewardship of God's Handiwork* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books and the Center for Public Justice, 1998).
- ¹⁸Gustavo Gutierrez, a Roman Catholic priest, considered that the founder of liberation theology is Peruvian. A book that explains his views is G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (New York: Orbis, 1971).
- ¹⁹Anna Peterson, *Seeds of the Kingdom: Utopian Communities in the Americas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Emilio A. Nuñez is an evangelical theologian from El Salvador who gives a balanced critique for liberation theology, accusing it of not being rooted in the Bible but in the social context, and who also alerts evangelicals to not forget the social problems of their particular context. Emilio A. Nuñez, *Teología de la liberación* (San Jose, Costa Rica: Caribe, 1986).
- ²⁰A classic work on the relationship between the evangelical faith and liberation theology in Latin America is given by Samuel Escobar, *La fe evangélica y las teologías de la liberación* (El Paso, TX: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1987).
- ²¹A series of essays on how evangelicals related to local politics in the Latin American context is explained by Pablo Alberto Deiros, ed., *Los evangélicos y el poder político en America Latina* (Grand Rapids, MI: Nueva Creacion, 1986).
- ²²An analysis of the prosperity theology from the Latin American view is given by Martin Ocaña, *Los banqueros de Dios: Una aproximación Evangélica a la teología de la prosperidad* (Lima: Ediciones Puma, 2002).
- ²³Hank Hanegraaff, *Cristianismo en crisis* (Miami, FL: Unilit, 1993) also comments on the bad influence of prosperity theology.
- ²⁴E. C. Beisner, *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty / W. B. Eerdmans, 1997).
- ²⁵Ernest Lucas, "A Short Introduction to the New Age Movement," *Science and Christian Belief* 4 (1992): 3–11 gives a concise explanation of the New Age movement and a Christian response to this movement.
- ²⁶Two good sources that explain in detail the relationship of Andean communities with the land and how their religious and cultural perspectives are involved are Fausto O. Sarmiento, Guillermo Rodríguez, and Alejandro Argumedo, "Cultural Landscapes of the Andes: Indigenous and *Colonio* Culture, Traditional Knowledge, and Ethno-ecological Heritage," in *The Protected Landscape Approach: Linking Nature, Culture, and Community*, ed. Jessica Brown, Nora Mitchell, and Michael Beresford (Cambridge: IUCN The World Conservation Union, 2005); and Daniel W. Gade, *Nature and Culture in the Andes* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999).
- ²⁷"Popular religion" (*religiosidad popular*) is a mixture and syncretism that some Roman Catholic communities have done to preserve ancient beliefs. Rodolfo Blank, *Teología y misión en America Latina* (Saint Louis, MO: Editorial Concordia, 1996). A case study on how an Andean community holds to this religious syncretism is well explained in Terry P. Smith, "Coca and the Mountain: Observations into the Worldview of the Quechua of Pano," *Notes on Anthropology and Intercultural Community Work* 22 (1996): 1–21.
- ²⁸Oscar Perez, ed., *El sermón ecológico: Un encuentro de la fe Cristiana con la crisis ambiental* (Lima: CONEP-APEP-VM, 1994). I have a chapter in this book, "La Biblia, un tratado sobre la naturaleza" [The Bible, a treatise on nature].
- ²⁹One university professor of chemistry published a book explaining the global environmental problems and encouraged Christians to embrace creation care: Juan C. Arroyo, *Guardianes de la tierra: Los Cristianos y el medio ambiente* (Lima: Editorial Puma, 1995). Later I justified the

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utility of creation care in biodiversity conservation in a paper published in the journal of the Peruvian Association of Ecology: Oscar González, "La conservación de la naturaleza según el principio bíblico de la mayordomía responsable," *Ecologia (Peru)* 1 (1998): 95–7.

³⁰The organizations that were formed in Peru to promote creation care were the *Instituto para la Conservación de la Naturaleza "Nueva Creación"* founded in 2003 and A Rocha Peru, founded in 2004. I was a founding member of both organizations.

³¹See www.creationcare.org.

³²www.arocha.org.

³³Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994). It is interesting that in an old book on Christian philosophy, Warren Young declares that there is an urgent need to develop Christian scholars, and he gives one example concerning the critics of evolution. He states that several evangelicals have written nonsense, criticizing this theory, and only Christians with adequate knowledge in the sciences should give opinions on this

topic. Warren C. Young, *A Christian Approach to Philosophy* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen Press, 1954). However, evangelical theologians that write for a Latin American audience keep quoting the out-of-date books of creationists Henry Morris and Duane Gish as scientific evidence against evolution. Richard B. Ramsay, *Integridad intelectual: Un llamado al Cristiano a pensar y vivir integralmente* (Terrasa: Editorial CLIE, 2005).

³⁴Check Psalms 8 and 104.

³⁵<http://whenheavenmeetsearth.org/>.

³⁶Pedro Arana, Victor Ferrer, and Oscar Gonzalez, *Llamados al cuidado de la creación: La función mayordomica de la iglesia* (Lima: Sociedades Biblicas Unidas, 2009). This was a booklet produced by two theologians and a biologist as part of a series of pamphlets on current topics and moral issues addressed to all Christian churches, sponsored by the United Bible Society of Peru.

ASA Members: Submit comments and questions on this communication at www.asa3.org → FORUMS → PSCF DISCUSSION.

ASA Annual Meeting Field Trips

Friday, July 19, 2013

Mammoth Cave National Park



Explore how the surface and cave tie together, eat an early lunch, possibly have time to visit the gift shop, and then go in the cave to learn about the geology, biology, and history of the cave. Participants

need to wear comfortable walking shoes and bring a jacket or sweatshirt since the cave temperature is about 55°F. Do not wear any shoes that have been in another cave or mine since 2005. All participants are required to walk the length of an artificial turf mat to remove spores and dirt after exiting the Cave.

Belmont Mansion



Listed as one of Nashville's top twenty tourist attractions, Belmont Mansion is the largest house museum in Tennessee and one of the few nineteenth-century homes whose history revolves around the life of a woman, Adelia

Hayes Franklin Acklen Cheatham. Belmont Mansion, located on Belmont University campus, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971. Its meticulous restoration and unique role in the history of Nashville and the South draw visitors eager to hear its story.

Discover Nashville



Spend a morning uncovering the beauty of Nashville. An experienced tour guide will blow you away with incredible stories of Music City, which is rich with history. Enjoy a driving tour of attractions such as Honky Tonk Row,

the State Capitol, Bicentennial Mall and Farmers Market, The Parthenon, world famous Music Row, and Studio B, where Elvis recorded the majority of his hit records. Then spend time inside the Historic Ryman Auditorium, considered the "Mother Church of Country Music," and visit The Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, for a self-guided tour of this \$37 million interactive musical experience.

Parthenon



The Parthenon stands proudly as the centerpiece of Centennial Park, Nashville's premier urban park. The re-creation of the 42-foot statue Athena is the focus of the Parthenon just as it was in ancient Greece.

The building and the Athena statue are both full-scale replicas of the Athenian originals. The Parthenon also serves as the city of Nashville's art museum. The focus of the Parthenon's permanent collection is a group of 63 paintings by nineteenth- and twentieth-century American artists donated by James M. Cowan.

Register at www.asa3.org