

MAKING CONGREGATIONS GREENER

The celebration of Earth Day began in 1970 and has now spread to 192 countries. The early organizers could not imagine that almost fifty years later environmental issues would remain challenging, emotional, and controversial. However, for faith communities, the concept of caring for all creation fits with the Gospel message of assuming responsibility for what God has given us. How much have congregations embraced the practices of refuse, reduce, reuse, and recycle?

Beginning Steps

Making the decision to become a greener congregation can seem overwhelming. However, there are several small and cost-effective ways to shape church practices and policies to honor the stewardship of creation.

Start a conversation. If the congregation has never discussed ecological issues as a community, consider a study or discernment process devoted to the topic.¹ Ask: How do our theological and biblical commitments translate into spiritual practices of caring for the earth? Perhaps a church group could read and discuss the seven different biblical perspectives on creation and reflect on the connections between these traditions and the natural sciences.²

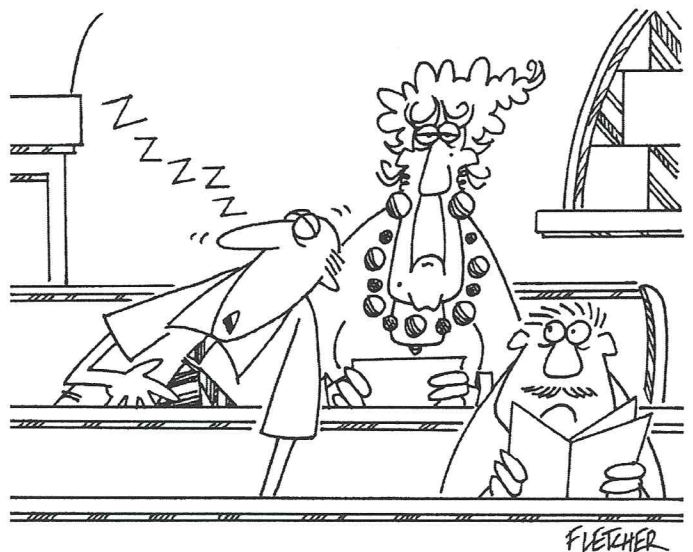
Another strategy would be to ask a group to review the congregation's vision or mission statement, website content, and other important documents. Does your congregation's vision reflect the care of creation? If it does not, how might some aspect of caring for creation that is authentic to your church be made more explicit?

Learn more about local environmental issues. Often members lack up-to-date information about local energy and food sources, water and wastewater treatment, forms of environmental damage, or potential hazards. Consider inviting guest speakers from community organizations involved in environmental health to inform church groups. Begin a study or discussion series on local environmental topics.

Identify people with passion and gifts to lead the church in stewardship practices. Almost every church has members involved in local efforts to address environmental concerns. But they may have never been asked to use their knowledge to help other church members move toward greater awareness and stewardship.

Reassess current consumption and waste patterns. An easy starting point is to use only recycled paper and other products for church materials. Most congregations could do a better job of providing more visible recycling receptacles for paper, glass, plastic, cans, and cardboard. Some churches even serve as recycling drop-off locations for their members and communities. Install bike racks to encourage worshipers to cycle to services and activities. Another overlooked area relates to the cleaning chemicals used around the building. Are these products safe for the people using them and for the environment? Are cleaning products stored safely?³

Laying Down Burdens. The author of *Less Clutter, More Life* says, "clutter represents postponed decisions."⁴



A STRONG PROPONENT OF EFFICIENT ENERGY USE IN THE CHURCH, EUGENE GOES INTO "SLEEP MODE" ON A REGULAR BASIS.

Experts estimate we never use 80 percent of what we keep. Does the same statistic apply to congregations? How much space is devoted to storing outdated props, equipment, curriculum, and seasonal material? One church cleared out two storage rooms, including old records and paperwork, to gain Sunday school rooms in return. Perhaps hanging on to objects reminds us of great periods in the church's past. However, giving away and recycling items from the past frees the congregation to move forward in ministry.

Bigger Steps

A congregation that is striving to manage church resources as caretakers of God's creation can take on even more ambitious projects.

Conduct an energy audit. A facilities committee should evaluate energy uses in its facilities every two years, including checking the heating and cooling equipment for efficiency. The committee can establish a baseline of heating, cooling, and lighting costs. About forty states have affiliates of Interfaith Power & Light (www.interfaithpowerandlight.org), a non-profit that aids congregations with energy conservation and efforts to shrink their carbon footprint. Their website provides valuable information about agencies who conduct energy usage for specific states. The U.S. Department of Energy (www.energy.gov) suggests some do-it-yourself versions of an energy audit.

Address underutilized buildings. The Garden Church in San Pedro, California, permanently solved this problem—they have no church building. The congregation meets at an outdoor central table surrounded by gardens—"a living sanctuary." Few congregations would find this a workable approach, yet other strategies could make a significant difference. For instance, too many church buildings remain empty for many hours during the week even though their facilities could be an important anchor for the wider community. Do the policies and fees that apply to outside groups encourage or discourage potential users? Seek out new partnerships and remove the barriers that prevent greater use of church facilities. One nonprofit organization, Partners for Sacred Places (www.sacredplaces.org), assists congregations in sustaining and actively using their structures. Leaders could learn about and consider some of their suggestions for maximizing buildings.

Replace equipment. Photocopiers, computers, and printers should have power saving features. If not, then consider replacing older equipment. Refrigerators and

freezers use large amounts of energy. If these units are older, the church might save money and energy by replacing them with equipment that is more efficient. A water heater should get special scrutiny if the unit keeps large amounts of water hot all the time. On-demand, tankless, or instant water heaters could be a good investment in a church where daily demand is not common. Light fixtures and bulbs should also be replaced with new technology that use less energy and cost less over the life of the bulb. Replacing poorly insulated windows and putting in more insulation also reduces energy use.⁵

Consider other sources of energy. Some churches install solar panels to generate renewable heat. Your region may offer the possibility of purchasing "green power" from wind and geothermal sources.

Become advocates. Most denominations offer opportunities for congregations to be a collective witness for environmental concerns. Other ecumenical efforts, such as Creation Justice Ministries (www.creationjustice.org), provide information on current legislation and policy initiatives to mobilize people around environmental justice issues.

When Abundance Leads to Resistance

Americans can easily take the beauty and abundance of our country for granted. When we live in a land of plenty, we are often blind to the erosion of natural resources and that leads us to resist any limits to our choices. Serving God by protecting God's creation conveys that we expect God's presence in all places.⁶

1. See the excellent Mennonite Creation Care Network curriculum (<http://www.mennocreationcare.org>).

2. William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

3. See Rebecca Barnes Davies, *50 Ways to Help Save the Earth, Revised Edition: How You and Your Church Can Make a Difference* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016) for more ideas.

4. Barbara Hemphill, *Less Clutter, More Life* (Pasadena, CA: True Roses, 2014), 12.

5. See Creation Justice Ministries (www.creationjustice.org) for purchasing guides and Earth Day Sunday worship materials.

6. Mark Torgerson, *Greening Spaces for Worship and Ministry: Congregations, Their Building, and Creation Care* (New York: Rowland & Littlefield, 2012).