

Greening the Church: Witnessing to the Gospel through the care of creation

by Stephanie Jaeger, M.Div. Senior

There are worms in the basement of Wicker Park Lutheran Church. They are composting the biodegradable waste that people bring to this Chicago church. The compost will be used to nourish the gardens of the church and the community. With the worms, and other environmentally friendly practices, Wicker Park Lutheran has joined the growing number of churches in the U.S. that are intentionally living out their faith in Jesus Christ through the care of creation.

Caring for creation to save money, reduce emissions, and eliminate waste

Consider the example of Resurrection Lutheran Church in Franklin Park, Ill. Following an energy audit, Resurrection switched 394 light fixtures to more efficient light bulbs. Through this and other energy-saving initiatives, the congregation reduced its electric bill by \$250 a month and reduced by over 49,000 pounds per year the amount of carbon dioxide emissions associated with its energy consumption. That's the equivalent of taking 25 cars off the road each year.

Resurrection paid for the retrofitting with a no-interest loan that is offered by the ELCA Metropolitan Chicago Synod thanks to a large grant it received from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation.

Eighty miles north, in Racine, Wisc., they aren't using plastic grocery bags any more at Emmaus Lutheran Church. No more disposable plastic or styrofoam dishes either. They're drinking their fair-trade coffee from reusable mugs, and designing and selling canvas bags. They are sitting down as a community to watch and discuss movies like "An Inconvenient Truth" on global warming, and "Affluenza" on the impact of our consumer culture.

Across town, St. Andrew's Lutheran Church is incorporating a four-week "Season of Creation" into its summer worship calendar to celebrate the natural



Members of Wicker Park Lutheran Church prepare the congregation's worm bin

world and lift up our calling to care for all that God has made. Each year they offer a "blessing of the animals" liturgy, and celebrate Earth Day with special worship materials.

Several of the Racine Lutheran churches have also completed energy audits and environmental audits of their congregations. They do so not just to find ways to cut their utility bills, but to learn about and control how the congregations' consumption impacts the environment. Emmanuel Lutheran has retrofitted its lights and now saves the energy equivalent of eight to ten cars a year.

Earth keeping is ecumenical

And it's not just Lutheran congregations that are taking action to care for creation. At Trinity United Methodist Church, also in Racine, they have outfitted the church kitchen with a new "Energy Star" dishwasher and freezer. On Earth Day they host an eco-fair where people can buy fairly traded products, learn about "green" cleaning products, and how to save energy at home.

Recently, Olympia Brown Unitarian Universalist Church, which has long participated in the Unitarian Universalist-sponsored "Green Sanctuary Program,"



Zachary Parris (M.Div., Junior) helps "green the cross" during LSTC chapel

joined the one Methodist and five Lutheran churches in Racine in an ecumenical effort to implement a "Green Congregation Program" in their faith communities. Members of the seven congregations meet several times a year to encourage and learn from one another how a faith community can model stewardship of God's creation.

Rhoads offers strategies for greening congregations

The "Green Congregation Program," developed by the Rev. Dr. David Rhoads at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, offers strategies, steps, and concrete suggestions to transform congregations into communities that intentionally celebrate creation and help to restore it. The program recommends establishing a small group of lay ministers, called a "Green Team," to stimulate and coordinate earth keeping initiatives throughout the whole life and work of the congregation.

Rhoads' recently revised resource, *Training Manual for the Green Congregation Program*, identifies five areas of faith life—worship, education, buildings and grounds, discipleship at home and work, and public ministry—and offers numerous examples of projects for each. From simple ideas like decorating the worship space with greenery, rocks and other natural things, to classes on Christian environmen-

tal ethics, to more extensive changes like installing solar panels, the range and wealth of suggestions makes it easy to adapt the manual to local possibilities and needs.

Caring for creation as Biblical mandate and act of justice

The "Green Congregation Program" is based on the theological understanding that we have a biblical mandate to care for creation, and that in caring for what God has made, we witness to God's ongoing presence in the world. Caring for the environment is fundamental to our faith.

The Rev. Paul Stumme-Diers, Bishop of the Greater Milwaukee Synod of the ELCA, and a strong supporter of greening initiatives throughout all expressions of the church explained, "The care for creation is fundamental to a first article understanding of our relationship to God and God's good creation. I like to think of the efforts of the church to be more green as being a movement of 'eco-evangelism.' It connects with stewardship, hospitality, accessibility, and nurturing community; it is about promoting an ecology that is conducive to sharing the good news. As a church we are to model eco-friendly practices so as to bear witness to a broken world."

Caring for creation is also a matter of justice. "As the environmental state of the world deteriorates, it is above all the poor, people of color, and people living in the developing world who are suffering most," Rhoads stated.

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David Rhoads helps members of Trinity United Methodist Church in Racine, Wisc., learn how to "green" their congregation. Mayor Gary Becker attended the workshop to discuss ways the congregation could contribute to the greening of Racine.



Green seminary; green synod

Greening the church is not just a project for congregations. Seminaries are going green too. "The seminary has been a place to try out and to model faithful earth keeping practices," said Rhoads. Recycling containers in common areas, recycled paper in the computer labs, liturgies like a "blessing of the animals" and the "greening of the cross" are now part of life at LSTC.

Synods are also committing to "greening." Last fall, Rhoads led a synod-sponsored "Green Congregation" training workshop in Milwaukee that drew 90 people from 38 different congregations. The workshop inspired the Greater Milwaukee Synod to establish its own synodical "green team."

Bishop Stumme-Diers explained, "At the Greater Milwaukee Synod we look to develop policies that promote sound environmental practices such as making subsidies available to synod staff personnel for the purchase of hybrid vehicles...I would love to see us be able to build wind turbines and then use the energy credits from them to pay the utility bills for our ministries among the poor."

Ways to help your church care for creation

How can you help the Church bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ through caring for creation?

A first step is to check out the many practical and helpful resources available through the Web of Creation at www.webofcreation.org. The Web of Creation is an internet-based clearinghouse of "ecology resources to transform faith and society" jointly sponsored by LSTC and the ELCA. On it you will find complete copies of the *Training Manual for the Green Congregation Program*, and the *Environmental Guide for*

Stephanie Lord (M.Div., Senior) and Benjamin Ingelson (M.Div., Senior), are the "keepers" of the Web of Creation web site (www.webofcreation.org)



Congregations, Their Buildings and Grounds available for downloading. Read them with other members of your faith community with whom you could form a local "green team" to lead your community to take action on behalf of creation.

"Whatever you do, be persistent, and celebrate what you can do," Rhoads recommended.

Resources for greening congregations

Web of Creation

www.webofcreation.org

Web of Creation is a clearinghouse for a wealth of resources for congregations and other faith-based organizations to develop earth keeping practices as well as to learn about the theology and ethics of caring for creation. You'll find the *Training Manual for the Green Congregation Program*, worship resources like the "Seasons of Creation" liturgies, and a comprehensive set of links to other sites promoting environmental stewardship.

Earth Ministry

www.earthministry.org

An ecumenical, Christian nonprofit based in Seattle that helps individuals and congregations connect their faith with care for the Earth. Publications include: *Earth Letter* mini-journal, and the curricula *Simpler Living*, *Compassionate Life and Food*, *Faith & Sustainability*. They have created many resources for congregations including *Handbook for Creation Awareness and Care*.

Eco-Justice Working Group of the National Council of Churches of Christ (NCC)

www.ncccecojustice.org

The NCC Eco-Justice Working Group provides Earth Day liturgies, curricula and mailings, updated environmental justice resource lists and distribution center, climate change information, and various congregational programs.

Evangelical Environment Network

www.creationcare.org

Initiated by World Vision and Evangelicals for Social Action as part of a growing movement among Christians to respond faithfully to the biblical mandate for caring stewardship of God's creation. They publish *Creation Care* magazine, engage directly in advocacy, and produce curricula and other resources for pastors and laity.