

MINNESOTA WOMEN'S PRESS

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Worship the earth 80 Minnesota congregations pledge their commitment to the environment

by Liz Rolfsmeier

Several years ago, Lissie Rappaport Schiffman was sitting at the High Holidays service at Temple Israel, pregnant and between jobs. She started thinking. Thinking about where she was going to now devote her energy. Thinking about what kind of world she was bringing her child into. Thinking about the current geopolitical climate, our dependence on foreign oil, and the global warming crisis—all of the ecological concerns that many people share. And she looked upward and found inspiration in the roof. To Schiffman, the roof was a place to begin.



Fast forward to the present day. Temple Israel now has a new 1.8 kilowatt solar roof. Schiffman, who heads the temple's Ner Tamid Task Force for Sustainability, started the fund to raise money for the roof. She now is building her own green home, with geothermal and solar electric power and a design that reduces the need for air conditioning.

"Tikun Olam" is a Hebrew phrase that means "repairing the world," and Schiffman applies that directly to environmental concerns. Schiffman has organized a Festival of Lights celebration at Temple Israel where, in addition to the traditional candle-lighting ceremony, they hand out energy-efficient light bulbs. Members of their Adult Jewish Learning Program have recently been requesting more education about environmental and sustainability issues.

"It seems to me that we've reached more of a tipping point because people are coming and asking for it," Schiffman said. "Because we haven't seen anything at the national level, it has to happen at the local level."

Congregations Caring for Creation

Several years ago, Temple Israel tapped into Congregations Caring for Creation/Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light (C3), an interfaith group committed to environmental action. Since its founding four years ago, the organization has grown to include about 80 congregations. C3 is a Minnesota-based organization and also functions as a chapter of National Interfaith Power and Light, which has chapters in 26 states representing 4,000 congregations nationwide.

C3 has assumed a flexible structure to accommodate the varying needs of its member congregations. It is at times a loose organization and a point of resources. Other times, it brings faith communities together quickly for special projects, such as advance screenings of Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth," or a series of talks with Arctic explorer Will Steger.

Rev. Wanda Copeland of St. Christopher's Episcopal Church said one of C3's goals is to create mentor relationships between active congregations and those just getting started. "It's a synergy issue," she said. "We do so much more together than we could do independently."

This year, Copeland has focused on bridging C3 with MetroCERTs (Clean Energy Resource Teams), a new coalition of community groups that address energy reduction. Congregations have been working in tandem with public-policy groups. They have hosted environmental fairs, with stations to make environmentally safe cleaners and learn about organic gardening. They have performed lighting, energy and solid waste reduction audits on their buildings. They have bought into CSA (community

Jamila Kosobayashi works on the new rain garden at the Mashid An-nur mosque in Minneapolis. Photo by Liz Rolfsmeier.

"Forget eternal life. If I don't leave this planet in a livable condition for my grandchildren, I can't imagine there's a greater sin." - Rev. Wanda Copeland



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"Every congregation comes in with their own list of what they've done and what they want to see done," Copeland said. "You kind of have to work with them and say, 'What is your entry point?' Maybe you have a congregation that's more excited about their lawns, and you talk to them about native plantings."

Godly gardens

When Mashid An-nur recently renovated its building and grounds, it decided to create a rain garden. The congregation is the planning process. According to Jamila Kosobayashi, the congregation is planning to edge the mosque's parking lot with plant prairie dropseed, orange coneflower, butterfly milkweed and other native plantings to catch and filter storm water runoff.

"If you drive through the country, in the ditches you see God has just worked this out beautifully," said Kosobayashi, who heads the project. "It's just a matter of putting those principles to work. It's so important to catch and filter the runoff."

"This is really living your faith because God tells you to take care of your planet," Kosobayashi said. "All the Abrahamic faiths teach us this. We believe there is a God and that he created all. If, as human beings, we understand that deeply, we cannot pollute the earth. We are the stewards of the earth."

The earth and social justice

"A person of faith is called to be a person who lives intentionally," Copeland said. "And that means being aware, that means being thoughtful about other people, and that's just part of what it means to be a serious person of faith. You can't be a person of faith if you're not caring about and aware of others. That's sort of the nature of the beast."

"Ultimately, it's all about social justice. And for people of faith there is some variation of 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you,'" she said. "People affected most quickly and most critically by climate change, by shortages of water and food and energy and all those other things, are always the poor."

Rachel Dykoski said her congregation, St. Stephen's Catholic Church, has always been strongly committed to economic and social justice issues. She just went to her first C3 meeting, where she learned about the cost benefits of using solar, and members are thinking of leasing solar power for their church. "I really think St. Stephen's sees climate change as a social justice issue," she said. "It's one of those things you can't ignore if you embrace a faith."

Seeds of change bloom

Lisa Herschberger, a scientist and member of the Minnesota Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, is a founder of C3. When the group started four years ago, she said, many people dismissed global warming. "Now there's a lot more interest in trying to take steps," she said. "It's very uplifting. People are trying to do what they can."

Herschberger said Steger's discussion of witnessing the breaking up of the ice shelves provoked considerable concern. Many congregations organized letter-writing campaigns. Others updated the boiler at their synagogue or mosque. Some did tire pressure checks in church parking lots. Some bought into wind energy. Her own congregation created a monarch way station and other projects through its "green sanctuary" program.

According to Herschberger, this surge of interest is coming none too soon. "What we're putting in the air now is going to affect us much further into the future, and we're already measuring changes in the ecosystem. We're seeing the fisheries move north. We're seeing the loons moving north. The models are showing pretty consistently that southwest California is going to be a lot drier and hotter, and Africa is going to have more drought. We're acidifying the oceans. That's the whole food web. We just keep going along, but it's going to be so much more obvious in the not-too-distant future."

However, she remains hopeful. "My deep belief is that we still can do something to change the course of global warming. We need a sea change in how we view what we do in our lives. I think our faith can help us do that," she said.

Living simply so that others may live

Lynne Holman, director of the Minnesota Council of Churches environmental program, agrees that people have become much more aware in recent years. "Lots of churches are very, very interested in environmental issues," she said.

Last fall, Holman started a program called "Healthy Homes, Healthy Congregations," that addresses toxic chemicals in congregations, homes and the community. She wants "to make sure the piece about toxic chemicals stays there," she said. "I feel an enormous sense of responsibility to our children."

Lyn Egolf Grider, a Quaker liaison for C3, said Quakers have long followed the ideal of "living simply so that others may live." She said her "major inspiration is the beauty and glory of God's creation and our responsibility as stewards." In her congregation, Prospect Hill Friends Meeting group, members have created carpool and biking maps.

Grider said she "would like to see the group work itself out of a job," she said. "I would like to see this be such a fundamental concern of congregations and human beings that there's no necessity for a group specifically focused on it."

"As people of faith, we're people of hope," Copeland said. "And I have to hope that what I'm doing makes such a difference that it will turn things around. If I can't hope in that, there is no hope. Forget eternal life. If I don't leave this planet in a livable condition for my grandchildren, I can't imagine there's a greater sin."

Copeland said people often feel overwhelmed by the immensity of climate change, but she reminds them, "We're not called to do all of it. We're called to do something. And it will all matter. Nothing we do is superfluous."

"And don't forget to pray," she said. "Sometimes praying can bring results when nothing does."

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Caring Congregations for Creation/Minnesota Interfaith Power & Light (C3/IPL)

www.c3mn.net
Fall Network Meeting: Sept. 21, 2-4:30 p.m.
First Universalist Church, 3400 Dupont Ave. S., Minneapolis

MetroCERTs
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