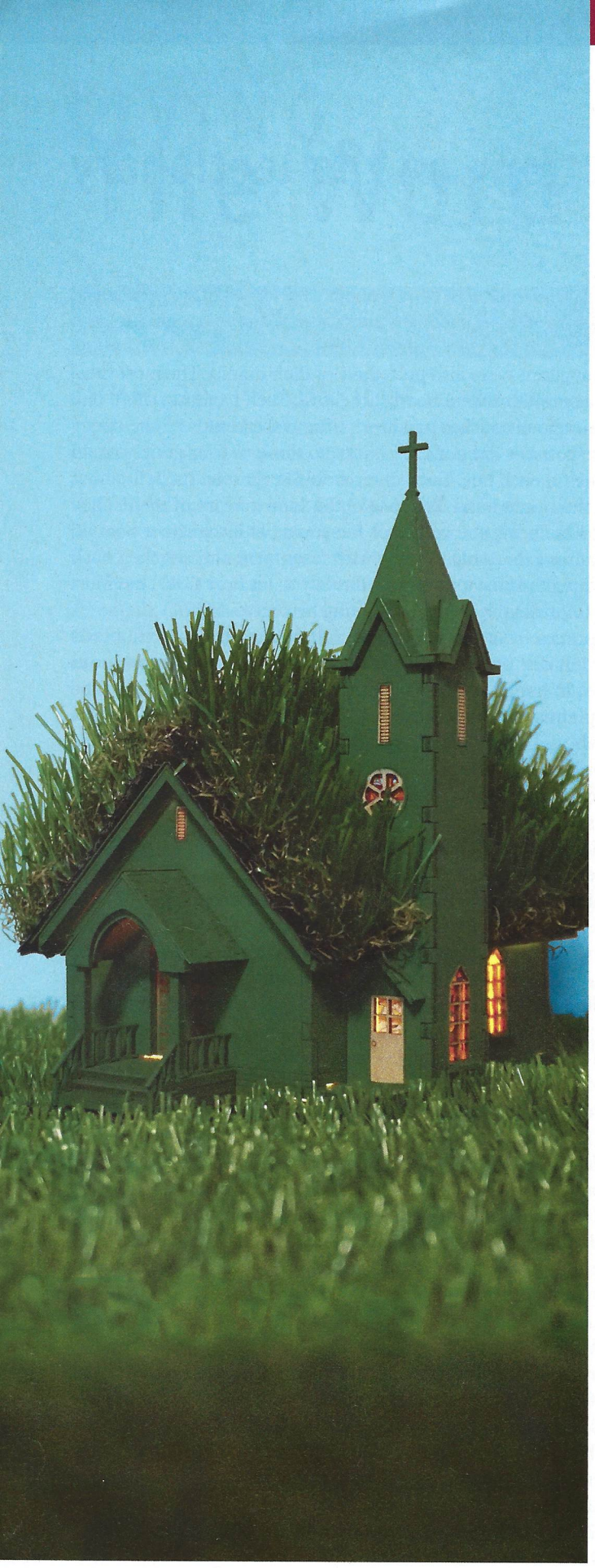

Photo illustration by Daniel Richardson

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A GREEN CHURCH?

Thinking big (and small)

by Anna Woofenden

AT PRESBYTERIAN-NEW ENGLAND

Congregational Church in Saratoga Springs, New York, environmental sustainability is woven into every aspect of church life, from how the church is heated to what happens at coffee hour to the content of sermons to what products are purchased for events. Being a green church has become a way of life, not an issue to be debated.

The pastor, Kate Forer, said that church members began this work several years ago by exploring together a series of questions that helped them to connect the dots between their actions and the entire network of creation. Where does our electricity come from? Are there opportunities for us to buy renewable energy, as a congregation and as individuals? If not, how can we as a church work to make those available? What are we doing with our trash? Are there ways to reduce our trash and increase our recycling and composting? What about transportation to church?

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They asked these local questions and then connected them to the global ones. How are we advocating for environmental stewardship in our community, state, nation, and world? What justice issues do we need to tap into? Climate change is already affecting people, leading some to seek refugee status and asylum in other countries—what are we doing to support them? How do we help people in other communities have access to clean water?

Such questions became powerful guides as the congregation navigated the choices and actions they were taking as a community. While people were generally supportive of the idea of being more environmentally active and sustainable, the work limped along for several years as they did a little here and a little there. Even when the church installed solar panels on the roof, there wasn't a cohesive effort.

"I was 100 percent on board with the work from the start," Forer said, "but it wasn't until one of our congregation members took on the leadership of our environmental action team that things really got going." Under Laura Falk's leadership, the EAT has taken off and is making continual and substantive change. "The team is jumping into as many things as they possibly can," Forer reported. Every month they have shared a different focus for the congregation to explore, and they have made lasting changes accordingly. For example, one month they focused on plant-based eating. "Then we presented to the congregation on the environmental impacts of our food choices, shared recipes with the congregation each week, and even had food sampling during coffee hour where various plant-based dishes were shared," said Forer.

Forer now sees the values of environmental justice seeping into other areas of the church's life and work. The community members in charge of coffee hour began to ask how they could be environmentally friendly in their hospitality. They decided that they could no longer use disposable cups, plates, or napkins—despite the ongoing time commitment of washing dishes. Office manager Julie Campbell, who does all the purchasing for the church, is part of the changes as well. "I cannot in good conscience buy individual bottled water for events anymore," she declared, and then she worked with the rest of the staff to get a watercooler installed.

"Care for the earth is not something that's separate from our life as Christians," Forer said. "I preach about immigration in the same breath as the climate crisis. It's recognized widely as one of the prominent issues we're dealing with as Christians. It's not even a question, rather part of the litany of things that we are praying for, working for, and advocating for in our worship, my preaching, our work and ethics as a church."

I asked Forer if they've met resistance from members of the congregation. "Honestly, not really," she replied. "We continue to strive to talk about the work of environmental justice in a way that raises awareness without guilting people or making them feel personally shamed." One of her parishioners is a conventional dairy farmer, and he wrestles with the many facets of how his farm and work intersect with environmental challenges. "I don't think he feels like he's ever treated 'less than' in our congregation," said Forer. "The thing is, we recognize and name that the climate crisis is so big that none of us can do everything, and all of us have to stretch ourselves and do more than we think we can. And so we have to work together and be kind to each other while challenging and calling our community forward in the work."

Many churches are grappling with their responses to the realities of climate change. They are installing solar panels, putting in garden beds in place of grass, and divesting from fossil fuels. These activities and others are markers of what it means to be a green church.

Since no corner or aspect of society is untouched by the climate crisis, faith-based climate advocates across the country are making a case that our faith communities are a key part of activating and cultivating the work that is needed in response. But that quickly raises the next flurry of questions: What does it mean to respond to the climate crisis as the church? What is our environmental impact, individually and as a group? How are faith communities particularly called and poised for this work? And where do we start?

A green congregation weaves care of creation into every aspect of its life together.

The root of the church's obligation is both spiritual and social. The foundational goodness of all creation connects humanity with earth, water, and air. "God brings two forms of life into being together—soil and servant—to live in dependent caring relationship," says theologian Wilson Dickinson. "God breathes life into this humanity and then plants a garden, placing the earthlings in it. The earthlings are put in the garden of Eden 'to till it and keep it.' The verbs that mark this central task—the human vocation in creation—could also be rendered 'to serve and preserve.'" Humanity is tasked with serving and preserving creation; we are formed in dependence on creation and on each other.

But while our mandate to participate in protecting creation is clear, it is also overwhelming. Peter Sawtell invites churches to reframe the question. Instead of asking, "What can churches do about the climate crisis?" the Eco-Justice Ministries executive director suggests we ask, "What does it mean to be the church in this time of great ecological and social justice crisis?"

In light of this reframing, Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, the missioner for creation care in the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts, defines a green church as one that understands that we are in the midst of a climate and ecological crisis—and responds as a responsible caregiver to planet Earth. Bullitt-Jonas echoes Forer: "A green church weaves care of creation into every aspect of its life together, from preaching and praying, to adult education, to public witness and advocacy." This definition calls us to treat care for God's creation not as one more program or to-do item but as essential to the work of loving the neighbor and being followers of Christ in the world.

Many denominations are taking on climate pledges and

projects and putting together lists of steps for congregations to take. Churches can look to denominational resources or those from ecumenical partners, and they can join in with existing programs—there is no need to reinvent them. Brooks Berndt, the minister for environmental justice for the United Church of Christ recommends this approach: "Pick one of these systems, maybe from your own denomination's resources or maybe from one of the collective, and start working the system. Whether you're a layperson or a clergyperson, you can begin, and commit to working through the process—step by step by step. It's less about making all the changes all at once and more about a sustained commitment over time."

Small steps, like banning Styrofoam or planting a garden, can lead to larger programs.

Peter Rood, who was the rector at Holy Nativity Episcopal Church in Los Angeles for many years, started 12 years ago with what he termed "low-hanging fruit." This included banning Styrofoam and many paper products and switching to energy-efficient light bulbs. That led to planting flower gardens used for worship spaces and then edible landscaping. Now the church has an active community garden, more than 30 fruit trees, and a plethora of programs and initiatives that promote care for God's earth and God's people.

Some newer congregations have made the idea of being a green church fundamental to their identity. The Garden Church in Los Angeles took an empty lot and turned it into an urban farm and outdoor sanctuary. The Keep and Till in rural Maryland meets on a family farm to cultivate both food and church community. The Wild Church Network and Holy Hikes are growing as more and more church groups take their liturgies outside.

Jonathan Lacock-Nisly reminds us that "being green isn't one-size-fits-all." The Interfaith Power and Light director of faithful advocacy hears from congregations that feel like they don't have the time or resources to be a green church—especially congregations that are already working to address issues like systemic racism or poverty. "Often those congregations are already doing amazing greening work that just needs to be recognized," he points out. "Is your church working for access to local, healthy food? Are you trying to help members without cars get to church on Sunday or to doctors' appointments throughout the week? That's really at the heart of what it means to be a green church—seeing where community needs meet caring for creation."

The climate crisis is here, calling us to include our planet's needs in our churches. This is not a luxury or an affinity group. This work is a growing imperative for the body of Christ called to love God and neighbor. I believe the church is being called to imagine being a place where a green team or a climate justice committee is a standard part of congregational life, right alongside the finance committee and the children's program team. I dare to imagine our sermons and our prayers, our choices and our actions, our welcoming of climate refugees, and our systems to feed people centering around how we can best steward and care for this sacred planet we all live on. We all live on this planet together; the church is called to play its part.

Bullitt-Jonas calls us to quickly take "the biggest, bravest step that any given church can possibly take." CC

40 IDEAS FOR CONGREGATIONS

1. Use rechargeable batteries in your wireless mics.
2. Compost your food scraps and coffee grounds.
3. Switch to energy-efficient light bulbs in your church building. Bonus: put them on timers or motion sensors.
4. Put flowers in vases of water without using floral foam.
5. Switch to 100 percent beeswax candles.
6. Swap out conventional cleaning supplies for environmentally friendly ones, and use environmentally friendly ice melt.
7. Use the same bulletin for an entire season, with small inserts for Sunday-specific information.
8. Install electric hand dryers in bathrooms. Or use sustainably produced paper towels and then compost them.
9. Source food locally for meals cooked at the church.
10. Install solar panels on your church building.
11. Put in a bike rack and create an easy and secure place for parents to store strollers when they walk to church.
12. Install rainwater collection tanks. This reduces both your building's impact on wastewater treatment and your use of city water for irrigation.

13. Download Interfaith Power and Light's free start-up kit (www.coolcongregations.org/start-up-kit/) and pick an item to work on.

14. Get your local electric company—or someone in your congregation who has the skills—to do an energy audit, and commit to working through the list of recommendations. Things to look at include the building's insulation and air sealing, the efficiency and cleanliness of the heating systems, and the possibility of installing more-efficient heat sources.

15. Implement a building-wide ban on bottled water and Styrofoam. Include this as part of a green policy for rental agreements.

16. If you aren't recycling, start. If you are, find out where your recyclables are going—and explore ways you can reduce or reuse the waste in the first place.

17. Walk or ride your bike to church. Develop a program to encourage churchgoers to share rides, pick up those less able to get to church, and extend the church community beyond the walls and onto the roads.

18. Gather a small group of people to research and map your local food system. Discover where food is being grown, how it is being distributed, who has access to what types of food in what neighborhoods, and how food waste is handled. Look for ways the church can be a resource for supporting food sovereignty in your neighborhood.

19. Host an annual clothing swap.

20. Have your governing body resolve to eliminate purchasing of all disposable cups, plates, bowls, and silverware. Move to reusable items for coffee hour and church meals—napkins and tablecloths, too—and create a culture of dishwashing as a spiritual practice or fellowship opportunity.

21. Try moving toward a plant-based diet in your shared meals as a community. Experiment with various recipes and dishes together.

22. Host a potluck at which people bring dishes made entirely from food grown within 100 miles.

23. Partner with a local farm to make your church a drop-off point for a community-supported agriculture program, and recruit households from the congregation to commit to participating in the CSA.

24. Replace your church lawn with vegetable garden beds and feed your local community.

25. Create a "pay what you can" farmstand to share produce with the community.

26. Share your space. A building that sits empty for most of the week is a waste of energy. Fill it with community groups, classes, nonprofits, etc.

27. Map your local watershed and see how your church is impacting the water in your community. Get involved with projects to add rain gardens, reduce lawn chemicals in runoff, and take other actions specific to your place in your watershed.

28. Check out Project Drawdown (www.drawdown.org). Dozens of scientists worked together for years to calculate the changes that would have the biggest impact on climate change. Their top ten include several things congregations can do: reduce food waste, avoid beef, add rooftop solar, and keep refrigerators and air conditioners in good repair.

29. Learn about the Black Church Food Security Network, and bring founder Heber Brown's examples and questions to your community (see "Black churches tackle food insecurity," Nov. 18, 2020).

30. Find out what organizations and groups are welcoming climate refugees in your area and how you can offer support.

31. Build relationships with your neighbors who are living outdoors and learn how climate change and poverty are affecting them.

32. Look at your church's investments and take steps toward divesting from the fossil fuel industry.

33. Participate in marches, sit-ins, actions, and civil disobedience on behalf of the planet.

34. Start a study group on eco-theology and share the learning with the community.

35. Create liturgies of lament and prayerfully consider the effects of the climate crisis together in community.

36. Preach on gospel messages of creation care. Wondering where to start? Try *Creation-Crisis Preaching: Ecology, Theology, and the Pulpit*, by Leah D. Schade, and *The Green Good News: Christ's Path to Sustainable and Joyful Life*, by T. Wilson Dickinson.

37. Check out the Wild Church Network and Holy Hikes, and consider joining an existing group or taking a group from your congregation to do liturgy outdoors.

38. Involve the church's children and teens in deciding what to do and in leading the charge.

39. Practice sabbath, individually and collectively, and notice how we are tied up in consumerism and greed.

40. Pray daily, with words and actions, for the care of our precious earthly home.

—AW, with gratitude for the collective wisdom of friends and colleagues who helped brainstorm this list