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Spiritual community gets environmentally involved

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

"Green living is just a fad that doesn't have a prayer of going mainstream."

Although that was once the common wisdom, environmental awareness has indeed become a part of everyday life, embraced by a broad segment of the public and businesses. But a key contributor to this increased green consciousness often gets forgotten. Through church-sponsored projects and activism, the spiritual community has played a vital role.

Q: How are religion and the environment becoming more connected, and why is this significant?

A: National movements such as "Creation Care" and "evangelical environmentalism" have focused attention on environmental concerns in a religious context, and some churches have made green projects a pillar of their community activities.

These developments matter because they show environmental protection can bring people together, rather than being divisive. Although politicians and the media often focus on the conflict over green issues, the involvement of churches can raise the discussion to a higher level.

Green projects launched by church organizations also can help society as a whole by conserving energy and water for example. These efforts are especially relevant these days, when government-run environmental programs may face limitations because of budget concerns.

Q: What kind of projects are we talking about?

A: At University Congregational United Church of Christ in Seattle's University District, the Sacred Earth group has participated in work parties to restore the banks of the Duwamish River. Members have offered a class on sustainable choices, set up an elaborate recycling system at the church and toured a wind farm in Central Washington. The church also hosts a Community Supported Agriculture program, where church members can pick up foods from local farmers.

Snoqualmie United Methodist Church recently held a Carless Sunday, encouraging church members to "walk, bike, carpool or otherwise find an alternative way to attend Sunday services." St. John United Lutheran Church in North Seattle has its own organic community garden, providing food for the church's twice-weekly charity soup kitchens.

Q: Do churches and other places of worship also incorporate green issues into their actual teachings and services?

A: Many do. Leaders of the Seattle Betsuin Buddhist Temple in the Central District produced a multimedia presentation called "Buddhism As Ecology," featured on the temple's website. Several area churches held prayer services in response to the Gulf Coast oil spill.

Q: What green resources exist for churches and their members?

A: Earth Ministry (www.earthministry.org), a Seattle-based nonprofit founded in 1992, helps churches around the nation expand their environmental practices and leadership. More than 40 churches in King County are affiliated with Earth Ministry.

Washington Interfaith Power & Light, a statewide network coordinated by Earth Ministry, is a religious response to global warming

that includes Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and members of other faiths.

Other national green organizations for churches and individuals include the Evangelical Environmental Network (www.creationcare.org) and the Catholic Climate Covenant (www.catholicclimatecovenant.org).

Q: Are there any potential issues to keep in mind regarding green churches?

A: Because of the First Amendment principle of separation of church and state, governments must be careful not to favor any particular churches or religions in environmental-partnership projects. In addition, nonreligious people may be sensitive about perceived intrusion of religion into the public and political arenas.

Q: How does the trend toward green churches benefit the average person, whether actively involved in these activities or not?

A: For individual church members, it can be extremely rewarding to work together as a community on green projects, especially with the added spiritual component.

For others, it's an example of the saying, "A rising tide lifts all boats." We all benefit from any efforts to conserve resources or reduce pollution. Spiritual and environmental interests have sometimes seemed far apart, but today they're working together more closely than ever for a better world.

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