

Churches Strive to Practice What They Preach on Environment

Environmental initiatives by religious groups are becoming more common, says Gary Gardner, director of research at the Worldwatch Institute, a Washington-based environmental think tank.

It's also becoming more common for these groups to work with both other denominations and secular environmental groups, eliminating the divide between environmentalists whose concerns center on social or moral issues and those more focused on the physical impacts.

"There's an increasing recognition among religious people that the destruction of the planet has a deep spiritual component," Gardner said, "and a recognition among the environmentalists that dealing with these matters from a purely scientific (approach) doesn't cut a very wide swath (with the public)."

Building on this recognition, the two groups are increasingly joining forces. The National Council of Churches of Christ, for example, teamed up with the Sierra Club last year to promote alternatives to plans to drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska.

Religious and environmental communities "look at the world from a moral perspective and are interested in creating a better world," Gardner said. "Both tend to look at nature as having intrinsic value." He said both groups also are highly critical of excessive consumption.

"We are finding religions becoming more active in changing consumption habits, redirecting (people) toward more environmentally sensitive habits," Gardner said.

Interfaith cooperation has gained impressive steam as a result of mutual environmental concerns. The Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility, for

example, represents 275 faith-based institutional investors that urge companies to be socially and environmentally responsible. The investors' combined portfolio is estimated at more than \$100 billion.

"We think that total stewardship of our fund means examining all the impacts a company is having or going to have on society and on the environment," said Jim Newland, chair of the Presbyterian Church USA's Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment. "If (money) were our only concern, we could probably find companies that are more profitable (to invest in)."

Newland said the Interfaith Center leverages the strength of its numbers: "When we go sit down with Intel, for example, and we're representing \$150 million worth of stock, they're probably a little more attentive than if we were just a 100-share stockholder."

The Interfaith Center's members often file shareholder resolutions regarding environmental issues. The Presbyterian Church recently filed a resolution with Cinergy, which Newland called one of the five largest carbon dioxide emitters among U.S. electric companies, requesting information on emission-control measures.

"We're looking down the road as long-term investors," Newland said. "We think legislation is going to appear that says carbon dioxide emissions have got to be cut. ... What's it going to cost us as stockholders?"

"That's the information that just hasn't been forthcoming," he said. "We want to be sure they don't have their head in the sand, that they're making progress, so we can get to a cleaner form of energy."

The National Religious Partnership for the Environment has been able to achieve more immediate results. "The NRPE is one of the most successful interfaith efforts in this country in recent history," said Mark Jacobs, executive director of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life. The alliance comprises Jacobs' group, the United States Catholic Conference, the National Council of Churches

and the Evangelical Environmental Network.

Paul Gorman, executive director of the partnership, stressed that it is not just a campaign. He said the partnership was founded with a long-term mission: "It was to integrate care for God's creation across the fabric of religious life. It's every bit about how we worship as how we heat our churches and synagogues."

Gorman said his organization has thrived because of how it implements its interfaith efforts. "We didn't try to start a new denomination or a new mega-agency," he said. "Our bylaws: 'We are called to be ourselves.'" Gorman said materials aren't prepared by a central office but by each partner after the collective agrees on the points to emphasize.

The partners' individual efforts to boost energy conservation illustrate this well, Gorman said. The Evangelical Environmental Network created the well publicized "What would Jesus drive?" campaign to discourage the use of sport utility vehicles. The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, on the other hand, recently used the Hanukkah story of a small amount of oil lasting eight days to promote conservation.

"(This) is a good example of how the common theological perspectives and concerns on the environment have enormously different kinds of expressions among American faith communities," Jacobs said.