

Congregations go for 'creation care,' one barrel at a time

by [Lauren Markoe](#)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) It was the time in pre-marriage counseling when the groom has to leave so the priest and the bride can talk alone. So Jamal Kadri stepped outside Holy Name Catholic Church that rainy day in Washington, D.C., and watched water pour from the church gutters and seep into the sanctuary.

The idea hit him like a tidal wave: "My church needs a rain barrel."

Kadri, a water expert at the Environmental Protection Agency who had recently converted to Catholicism, asked the priest if his contribution to Holy Name's building fund could be a rain barrel to catch the water, and channel it to a church garden.

He installed the 275-gallon barrel -- salvaged from his father-in-law's farm -- last summer.

"Water has such a key role in the church -- in the sacraments, baptism, the flood, Noah. And my professional background is in water," said Kadri. "It just made sense."

Parishioners and clergy across the nation are coming to similar conclusions lately, as the creation care movement spreads from congregation to congregation. Rain barrels, once ubiquitous on the family farm, gave way to garden hoses decades ago. But the barrels -- now more likely to be made of recycled plastic than wood -- are making a comeback.

Irrigating from a rain barrel saves water that would otherwise come from a municipal water system. It also reduces runoff and erosion, keeping bacteria, pesticides and other pollutants out of streams and

rivers. Stormwater runoff is the main cause of water quality problems in the United States, according to the EPA.

No one keeps track of the numbers, but it has become increasingly easy to find a church with a new rain barrel.

"Our kids came up with the idea for ours," said Rev. Heather Shortlidge, associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Annapolis, Md.

The children of the church two years ago made the rain barrel a religious school project, decorated it with their colorful handprints and asked the adults to install it. Now the barrel sits in the church courtyard, supplying water to trees, bushes and flowers.

A second barrel waters the vegetable garden at the minister's residence.

"It's really a simple way to have an environmental impact, and it was our first small step to opening up a larger conversation about what more we can do for the environment," said Shortlidge, whose church has also switched to recycled paper and is considering solar panels for the roof.

Rain barrels also save churches on their water bills, though most houses of worship don't seem to tally up the savings. The initial investment is minimal, with prices ranging from free -- when environmentalists like Kadri donate the barrels and labor -- to about \$60 a barrel.

Other religious groups use rain barrels as fundraisers for environmental projects or sell them at a discount to encourage water conservation in the larger community:

-- In St. Louis, the teen group of the Jewish Environmental Initiative raffled off three rain barrels this spring.

--In Mobile, Ala., the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer charges members \$50, and nonmembers \$60, for rain barrels the environmental committee makes by power washing donated 55-gallon drums that once held

glue.

-- In Glen Ellyn, Ill., just west of Chicago, the First Presbyterian Church's environmental group has for the past few years sold 50-gallon barrels for about \$60.

"While many people around the world don't have access to clean drinking water, we use it to wash our cars," said First Presbyterian parishioner Cathy Colton, who bought a rain barrel for her Glen Ellyn home last summer.

"It's recognition that God has made us stewards of creation and its limited supplies," Colton said.

Next month (September), Dottie Yunger plans to install and bless a rain barrel at the Washington City Church of the Brethren on Capitol Hill, which she describes as "an old church building with huge water bills."

Yunger, a Methodist minister-in-training, is also a riverkeeper for the Anacostia -- a kind of "neighborhood watch" for the watershed around the river, which carries high levels of pollutants as it flows through the nation's capital.

The rain barrel will help control runoff at Brethren and lower its water bills, she said. But it will also serve as a model for other churches.

"Churches in particular are called upon to be stewards of the environment," said Yunger. "We want to show people how they can be part of the solution."