Congregations turn to compost for lessons on life, death and the environment

by Adelle M. Banks

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WASHINGTON (RNS) The wheelbarrow outside the sanctuary was overflowing with vegetable scraps; decomposing matter filled the baptismal font; and a pile of rich brown soil replaced the Communion table.

Ashley Goff, minister for spiritual formation at Church of the Pilgrims, wanted to convey a message about the cycle of nature this fall, and she could think of no better analogy than the congregation's growing enchantment with compost.

"I wanted them to see the process of life and death and change," she said of her Presbyterian Church (USA) congregation of 70. "It's a dying and a rising, where new life begins."

Across the country in the past decade, hundreds of houses of worship have started composting, relating it to theological concepts of resurrection and stewardship.

Stacey Kennealy, sustainability director of GreenFaith, said congregations used to be put off by the challenges of composting — such as odor and pests — but now urban, suburban and rural houses of worship are digging into the practice.

"Compost is good for gardens, and as more and more congregations 'green' their food operations, and focus on waste reduction, they view composting as part of that," she said.

Some congregations create the compost on site and others work with a commercial composting company that makes weekly collections.

Goff has written an article for a forthcoming issue of Union Theological Seminary's Quarterly Review about how her congregation turned from ignoring its soil to preparing food for hungry neighbors with vegetables grown from its composted soil.

She compares her time in her church's backyard to making lasagna — spreading vegetable scraps in one layer, straw in the next.

"We have a way of discarding our scraps that is a holy process rather than just unconsciously throwing it into the trash can as if it doesn't matter anymore," said Goff, who oversaw the blessing of her church's first compost bin in 2010.

Yaira Robinson, associate director of Texas Interfaith Power & Light, said a synagogue and a Methodist church in Austin have used new composting services available in that city.

"Most everything from the lunch is compostable because we switched to compostable plates," she said of the weekly Saturday meal served by Congregation Agudas Achim, a Conservative synagogue that she attends.

With reports that 40 percent of food goes to waste, Robinson said, houses of worship are starting to take action.

"That's just outrageous, especially when congregations are many times on the front line of people who don't have enough to eat," she said.

Barbara Rossing, a New Testament professor at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, said more than earthy-crunchy congregations have taken to composting.

"It's not just a bunch of liberal, left-wing people," she said. "It's people who've grown up on going to camp, people who have grown up on farms, people who for some reason love the watershed, love saving. I think it taps into some of the spirit of conservation and conservative values, too."

The theological school produces 400 cubic feet of compost each year for its vegetable and landscape gardens, diverting more than 800 cubic feet of waste from the landfill, said Jim Schaal, sustainability coordinator.

From Baptists in North Carolina to Sikhs in California, composting has been adopted as an environmental and humanitarian pursuit. Compost in Methodist and Jewish vegetable gardens enriches produce delivered to local food banks.

Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb said the leftovers from preparations for the vegetarian luncheon served after services each Saturday at his Bethesda, Md., congregation amount to “a lot of peels, cores, stems, coffee grinds, etc.,” that get turned in a hand-cranked metal drum.

“Genesis 2 tells us that the human (adam) comes from the earth (adamah), and that our mandate is ‘to serve and to guard’ the land,” said Dobb, who leads Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation. “That starts, literally, with guarding and conserving the organic matter upon which our crops and our lives depend.”

Maryland Presbyterian Church, in the northern suburbs of Baltimore, initially used its own composter to recycle coffee grounds and leaves. But members were concerned that the large amounts of paper towels used by their Montessori school could not be recycled. Now they work with a veteran-owned composting company and have reduced their weekly trash for the dump from six cans to two.

“We are painfully aware of how Earth’s complex systems are in danger of breaking down, to a large extent because of how we humans have exploited Earth’s resources and have ignored the ways in which we pollute the air, the water and the soil,” said Bill Breakey, a member of the church’s Environmental Stewardship Action Group.

At St. Columba’s Episcopal Church in Washington, composting started with the nursery school and now the children are setting the example for the adults of the church, said science teacher Kate McLynn.

“Our composting and recycling was so successful at our church picnic this summer that we had only a couple pounds of waste from a gathering of several hundred,” she said.

Now at Church of the Pilgrims, about 10 people bring their compostable material with them to church.

David Galbraith, who has attended for 14 months, has changed the routine at home, where his 5-year-old has learned to put an apple core in a bowl next to the sink instead of in the trash. It then is transferred to a container in the fridge, then to a bag carried inside another for the bus ride to church each week.

“Both food and faith are very central elements to people’s life so it’s natural that in the context of faith that food would be considered,” he said.