What does it mean to be a green church during a climate crisis?

It’s a way of life. But it starts small.

by Anna Woofenden in the August 10, 2022 issue

(Photo illustration by Daniel Richardson)

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?

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."

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

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?

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.

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

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.”

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.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Thinking big (and small).”

Read the sidebar article on 40 ways a church can go green.