

Articles

How Faith Communities Are Helping to Save the Planet Part 4: God is Green: The New Civil Rights?

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Ask those at the intersection of faith and ecology if their movement is poised to be the "next civil rights movement," and most will begin nodding affirmatively before you can finish the question. Recall the words printed boldly across Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s door: "To Redeem the Soul of America." Environmentalists of faith believe that finding communion with the natural world is an integral step in that journey.

Rev. Steve Brown of the Atlanta Presbytery's Caring for Creation Committee maintains, "It's like any of the great social issues of one's time, whether it was slavery in an earlier age or civil rights in the fifties. Any time there is a pressing issue that affects the health and welfare of human beings and the created order, one's Christian faith calls one to respond, to reach out, to care."

Rev. Brown carefully distinguishes spiritual-environmental values from the often polarized political battles. "It's not just a liberal-conservative church issue," he says, explaining that everyone must act to preserve the environment. "If we care about the marvelous diversity in this created order--animals, plants and all that God has created--and the interdependence of it all, the way that God has created it so that everything is born and everything dies, and everything that dies is food for something else."

Organic farmer Daron Joffe has united his Judaic faith with his love for the land that yields sustaining foods. He believes in the healing and transformative power, both environmental and social, of tikkun olam, or repairing the world. "As one people, we share one earth," he says, echoing a central ethic of the Baha'i faith. "This is such an opportunity for different religions to come together with a common goal, and that goal is healing the world. Through social, entrepreneurial, and environmental endeavors, we can build community while restoring ecology."

But Joffe, like many environmentalists of faith, is a pragmatist. He notices the excessive lighting, vast parking lots, and the abundance of SUVs at his community center. Greening congregations and communities will take patience and education, but some fear that melting ice caps, sinking aquifers, and expiring species tell us that time is running out. Historically, however, Americans have earned high marks for rapid mobilization.

Georgia Power's recent introduction of a Green Energy program marks a significant achievement that may have been missed without action from Georgia Interfaith Power and Light (GIPL) and other environmental advocacy groups. GIPL leaders Rev. Woody Bartlett and wife Carol Bartlett are hoping to recruit more congregations in an effort to make Green Energy a success. "Faith communities, churches, synagogues, and mosques are going to have to get on board if they want to stay relevant," Rev. Bartlett says. "There's good evidence you can't scare people into it. Love, fascination, intrigue are better long-time motivators."

So what impact will conservation in faith communities have on congregations and the environment? The Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star® for Congregations program calculates that "[c]ongregations [in the U.S.] would save nearly \$500,000,000 to spend on other priorities," if they were to implement energy saving methods. In addition, "more than 5 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions would be prevented." And this figure does not include energy conservation by individual congregants.

Jeff Ross-Bain, a veteran environmental and mechanical engineer, foresees that once faith communities act within their

own congregations, their influence will naturally expand into greater civic dialogue. "I think the church has a very important voice in lobbying for issues and in expressing those principles which lead towards the proper care and feeding of our environment." The National Religious Partnership for the Environment, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, the Evangelical Environmental Network, and many other national advocacy groups already evince the likelihood of Ross-Bain's forecast.

And yet, it is unlikely that most have heard a pastor, imam, rabbi, or priest speak to environmental issues. Few congregations have more than a lone recycling bin. There is little in the way of talk or action on the faith landscape, and environmentalists of faith fear what it might take to rouse the majority. "When does Pharaoh get it?" Carol Bartlett asks, referring to the Biblical story of Exodus. "When his son dies," she answers. But if intervention starts now, say environmentalists of faith, our sons and daughters will see a society that lives in elegant harmony with the natural world.

Links:

1. [Trinity Presbyterian Atlanta](#)
2. [Georgia Power Green Energy Program](#)
3. [Georgia Interfaith Power and Light](#)
4. [Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life](#)
5. [National Religious Partnership for the Environment](#)
6. [Evangelical Environmental Network](#)
7. [Energy Star® for Congregations](#)
8. [Southface Energy Institute](#)

This article is the fourth in a four-part series on the environmental movement and religious faith.

[Part 1](#)

[Part 2](#)

[Part 3](#)

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