

The Oregonian

The green gospel

Oregonians of all faiths respond to global warming, unified in a belief that we must nurture the natural world, not conquer it

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Gardner Grice runs the toe of his boot over the marbled flooring.

"It's all natural," he says, proud but not bragging. "Made of cork and linseed oil."

He slides his fingers over the polished masonry bricks -- not covered with Sheetrock or paint -- made by Willamette Graystone in Salem. Grice walks past the three-story atrium, where plants thrive on rainwater collected from the roof and filtered into the planters. The janitor's keys on his belt jangle as he opens a closet. Out drifts the aroma of oranges, the distinct smell of Earth-friendly cleanser, which sure beats the old stuff: "You'd want to run into the hall just to get a breath of air," Grice says.

Half a dozen sextons help Grice clean the green-as-it-gets Buchan Building, owned by the First Unitarian Church in Southwest Portland.

Climate change has propelled green thinking to the point that it's become an article of faith in many Oregon churches, synagogues, monasteries, mosques and meditation centers, on everything from environmental construction to conscientious consumption.

"We must set an example by leading," says the Rev. Marilyn Sewell, senior minister of First Unitarian. "And one clear way to do that is to get our own houses -- worship and personal -- in order."

When First Unitarian needed a new building, they insisted on the greenest path. They dismantled and salvaged what they could from the old building at Southwest 12th Avenue and Salmon Street. They chose local recycled material for the new construction when possible. They finished, furnished and maintain the 20,000-square-foot Buchan Building with green products. Its rooms rarely sit empty. The Northwest Academy, an independent school for grades 6-12, holds classes here. Social justice groups have their offices in the basement, and public meeting spaces can be rented.

First Unitarian has won high praise for its green practices from its national denomination, from architects across the nation and from the city itself. But green religion is more than sustainable sanctuaries. Little things can make a difference.

Faith communities across Oregon sponsor interfaith workshops about what light bulbs to use, energy audits and green remodels. Pastors, priests, rabbis, imams and teachers preach the green gospel. Food and faith programs connect religious folks to local farms. Churches collect and recycle spent batteries. A 12-year-old praises composting at her bat mitzvah. Local Muslims work with SOLV to preserve wetlands and create habitat gardens.

None of that's a great surprise in green Oregon. Ecology as an expression of spirituality stretches back centuries to Native Americans, who revered the salmon and connected its life cycle with their own. Settlers found solace as well as prosperity in the beauty of the land. In the 1970s, the bottle bill and land-use restrictions stamped the state as an environmental trailblazer. Environmentalists compared the Columbia Gorge to a cathedral and old-growth forests to churches.

Today, that attitude trickles down to the pew: People of faith believe they have dominion in, not over, the Earth. They must be nurturers, not exploiters. As politicians half a world away debate a climate treaty to limit carbon emissions, Oregon's varied religious groups embrace a message: an irresponsible lifestyle that abuses the natural world is not only selfish.

It's a sin.

Jennifer Trom drops off her 3-year-old daughter at St. Andrew Lutheran Church preschool and slips into the sanctuary to talk chickens and creation.

She points out her family's favorite pew, a couple of rows in front of the towering pipe organ. From here, she can look out the three tall windows to the Beaverton church's wetlands and keep her ear on the pulpit, too.

Her love of the outdoors and all God's creatures started early. "As soon as I could talk, I asked for a horse." She got one at age 10, but now, with a young family, she makes do with chickens. Her four hens, including Bob ("the first word my daughter could say"), live in her backyard in Washington County.

"I give them food and water, and I do it slowly, intentionally. I watch them as they go after bugs, fight each other over a tasty bite." She finds them endlessly entertaining and, in return, they supply her with "yummy eggs" and a sense of peace. "It feels good to care for another creature."

One of the reasons she joined St. Andrew's green team was to protect the wetlands, home to birds and coyotes. She says it's her contribution to true stewardship.

The whole congregation is learning this lesson, says the Rev. Mark Brocker, lead pastor of St. Andrew. "We may end up being the generation that presided over a number of salmon going extinct," he says. "But I'm hoping we can get on top of that. Often the church seems to lag behind whatever is going on in the world."

In the 1960s, St. Andrew's bought about 10 acres to build a small church with room to expand. When it was time to grow, the congregation discovered that they couldn't build on seven acres of wetlands. The challenge became making the best use of its buildable land and protecting the wetlands as a place of rest and renewal within the busy suburb. Increased awareness also means they step up efforts to educate each other on how theology and ecology intersect. And they keep their community garden.

In Northeast Portland, members of Westminster Presbyterian Church have a green team, too. They boosted recycling, banned Styrofoam, researched green cleansers and detergents and are considering a solar project. Classes offered by the church have focused on practical ways to live greener lives. Westminster's minister, the Rev. Jim Moiso, has preached on Psalm 24: "The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." But the trick, he says, is to "begin to show that we believe it."

Dharma Rain Zen Center in Southeast Portland installed rooftop solar panels, which eventually will supply about half the power for the main building. The idea appealed to Buddhist values of interdependence, says Kakumyo Lowe-Charde, a monk responsible for the center's facilities. "Everything is connected to everything else. All of our actions impact everything else."

At Great Vow Zen Monastery in Clatskanie, maintenance supervisor Evan Corcoran gradually is switching to compact fluorescent light bulbs. He also plans an energy audit of the former public elementary school to save more energy and money. "It was built back when gas was two cents a gallon," Corcoran jokes.

Conservation can come down to a simple beeswax candle at Hanukkah or on the Sabbath. Neveh Shalom, a Conservative Jewish congregation in Southwest Portland, encourages beeswax instead of more common

petroleum-based candles.

Fumes from paraffin candles are toxic, says Jordan Epstein, a member of Neveh Shalom's Shomrei Teva (Hebrew for "Guardians of the Earth") chapter. "It's like burning diesel fuel in the house." Neveh Shalom also just launched construction on a new green chapel and administrative wing. Fred Rothstein, executive director of the synagogue, considers it one example of tikkun olam, the Jewish teaching that people must participate in the repair of the world.

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, an association of 17 Christian denominations, plays a major role and connects people of all faiths to green resources. It offers workshops on energy efficiency. It sponsors food and faith programs that include lower-income families who need better access to fresh fruits and vegetables. It connects them with local farms, so less gasoline is used to transport food to plate. It also offers an online store (<http://ShopIPL.org>) that sells energy-saving products to congregations.

Jenny Holmes coordinates environmental ministries for Ecumenical Ministries. She sees a growing awareness by all religions that global warming warrants urgent action and the less-privileged suffer, and will suffer, its effects the most.

"More and more of us are feeling a sense of responsibility for our children and grandchildren," she says. "And more congregations are tying environmentalism to social justice."

On a foggy fall morning at Mt. Angel Seminary, filtered sunlight from the ceiling softens the edges of desks and podiums and renders every face in natural hues. No glare shines off pull-down maps or boards where professors scrawl Latin phrases. The man-made lights are off. Louvers direct and diffuse God-given light in the classrooms.

Annunciation Hall is the newest building at the Catholic abbey and seminary that sits on the bluff that overlooks the town of Mount Angel. A year old now, it's still a work in progress as builders fine tune: A downpour bouncing off the skylights can drown out the most distinguished professor; and the electric whir of the complicated louvers that focuses daylight is sometimes too loud.

But the Rev. Jeremy Driscoll, a Benedictine monk who teaches theology and has an office in Annunciation, is patient with the quirks. It seems fitting, he says, to study the nature of God in a building infused with natural light.

At Holy Redeemer Catholic School in North Portland, natural light is one green element in a new addition. An eco-roof, with trays of succulent plants that absorb rainwater and directs run-off into a landscaped bioswale in the schoolyard, is another. The inspiration for the addition was a 2001 pastoral letter from 12 regional bishops on the state of the Columbia River watershed. They called on all people to restore "the living waters of God's creation." Holy Redeemer's part in that restoration started with the decision to build green.

In sacred -- as well as secular -- circles, green choices have become a question of ethics. More and more politicians line up behind Al Gore and frame global warming as a question of morality. Gore, who calls the climate crisis "a moral and spiritual challenge," on Monday will pick up the Nobel Peace Prize for his environmental advocacy.

But it's Gardner Grice, who tends the green Buchan Building for First Unitarian, who boils the issue down to common sense.

"If you don't save the Earth, there'll be no souls to save."

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