

## Churches put faith in action for environment

- **Spiritual leaders say Easter is perfect time, while reflecting on rebirth and renewal, to put focus on all of creation -- Earth**

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The global environmental crisis has filled spiritual leaders with a bitter awe this Easter, a time for repentance and rebirth, to consider the broken body and the transcendent miracle.

As the sun rose on Good Friday, a stark study spelling out the disastrous repercussions of global warming hit the news wires.

"Certainly, we have a lot to repent for in our treatment of the Earth over the centuries," said the Rev. Larry Hunter of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Orinda.

"Lent is a time of introspection," said the Rev. Greg Ledbetter of Shell Ridge Community Church, a Baptist congregation in Walnut Creek. "It asks us to make a rigorous assessment. Easter brings the huge implication to be aware of the big picture."

The Rev. Sally Bingham of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco made that rigorous assessment, and she gave up heating her house for Lent.

"It was a symbol of not polluting the air for people who live around the dirty, filthy power plants," said Bingham, who founded California Interfaith Power and Light. The ecumenical organization promotes sustainable energy practices and sounds the alarm on global warming.

"The celebration of Easter and the Resurrection ... is a very appropriate time to relook at our relationship with the sacred, which includes creation," she said.

This is also a time to measure how much "the religious center of gravity has shifted," wrote Jim Rice, editor of Sojourners Magazine.

Last year, more than 100 mainstream evangelical leaders from across the nation signed an "Evangelical Climate Initiative," declaring they had "seen and heard enough" to convince them that real perils threaten the Earth.

"Human-induced climate change is real," the statement says.

The second in a series of four reports by the International Panel on Climate Change, released in Brussels, Belgium, on Thursday, predicts widespread suffering and starvation as the result of global warming -- a steady increase in the Earth's average temperature triggered by fossil fuels and industrial pollution.

The changes seem to be motivating churches. In the past six months, 70 congregations have joined Interfaith Power and Light, which now has 460 members.

"We may damage the world, but with a renewed attentiveness we can heal it," said Ledbetter.

That message dates to biblical times, said the Rev. Peter Whitelock, spiritual leader of Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church. The Apostle Paul lamented the burden of human selfishness weighing down creation, and he spoke of the glory of the Resurrection as a power to be turned loose in people, Whitelock said.

"There is a sense in this that the Resurrection is more than a one-time event but is rather a reality to shape and transform our lives so that we can truly live as God's children," he said. "This will be good news to the creation, too."

The link between the Lenten period and stewardship of the environment can be quite literal, said the Rev. Faye Orton Matthews of Lafayette Christian Church.

Repentance is not complete without making a change, she said, and nature often inspires spiritual and emotional healing that change compels.

"There's a great connection between resurrection and what we learn from nature," she said. "When we destroy those images of God and they pass away from us, it's tragic."

Her church leaders acted on that faith after they began to clear two wooded acres for a building expansion. Moved by the peaceful dignity of the grove, they backed off. Instead, Lafayette Christian will have an outdoor gathering place, Orton Matthews said.

"It is no stretch to see that being environmentally concerned is about repentance and rebirth," said the Rev. Sylvia Vasquez of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Walnut Creek.

Her congregation has made a \$250,000 commitment to install solar panels on the parish hall.

"The rubber meets the road when we start talking about financing," said Vasquez.

California Interfaith sees an identical commitment to put faith in action in other congregations.

"Churches with a working group on family, or instilling faith in teens, now have 'the Climate Action Team,' and they are asking what they can do other than showing films," said

outreach coordinator Jessica Brown.

The action teams study the politics of oil and water, advise congregants on how to conserve energy and recycle. They educate themselves on global dimming and water contamination.

Repentance may give way to a miracle, said Ledbetter, whose church offers a four-part series on natural resources and sustainability.

"What we do is a tiny bit of water in a mighty ocean," Ledbetter said. "I also believe the Earth has the power to heal. If we get out of the way, it could heal itself."

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