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Citing Heavenly Injunctions to Fight Earthly Warming

By NEELA BANERJEE

Correction Appended

WYANDOTTE, Mich. — To find St. Elizabeth [Roman Catholic Church](#) in this working class suburb south of Detroit, look toward the roofline, for the windmill. Not a big windmill, it is a spare steel structure maybe nine feet high, perched atop the rectory of the church and facing northeast into the winds that come off Lake Erie.

Yet the windmill, two solar panels on the roof, another atop the front porch and a solar water heating system above the garage are the pride of the Rev. Charles Morris, St. Elizabeth's priest.

Over the last five years, Father Morris has sharply reduced his small parish's energy use and emissions of carbon dioxide, the compound most scientists believe has led to [global warming](#), and he has organized other congregations across [Michigan](#) to do the same.

"We're all part of God's creation," Father Morris said. "If someone like me doesn't speak about its care, who will? The changes we've made here, that's a form of preaching."

Over the last year, religious activism on global warming has won much attention. Last February, 86 evangelical Christian leaders backed an initiative to combat global warming, a move that broke the evangelical movement's broad silence on the issue but exposed stark divisions.

In October, 4,000 congregations of various faiths will show films on global warming, including "An Inconvenient Truth." [On Oct. 8, Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist leaders met in Philadelphia to discuss global warming.]

At ground level, clergy members and lay people have been working to increase awareness of global warming and to reduce their own greenhouse gas emissions. Many, like Father Morris, were active for years before the issue attracted wider concern. Encounters in their own lives awakened them to global warming, they said. But their faith and the imperatives they see in their Scriptures compelled them to act, they said.

“If you do worship the Creator, you take care of his creation,” said Greg Wickersham, a high school teacher and a member of the environmental ministry at Intown Community Church in Atlanta, which is affiliated with the theologically conservative Presbyterian Church in America.

“If we are made in his image, we should mirror his image in our dominion over the Earth,” Mr. Wickersham said. “He is creative and sustaining, not destructive.”

Father Morris is the executive director of the 124-member Michigan Interfaith Power and Light, the state affiliate of Interfaith Power and Light, the religious association that organized the screenings of the global warming films.

The Michigan organization's representatives speak to local congregations about global warming and ways to counteract it. They arrange for “energy audits,” so people can learn how to reduce consumption without sacrificing comfort. Changes include replacing regular light bulbs with long-life fluorescent ones and more ambitious projects like installing solar panels.

In 2005 and the first three quarters of 2006 combined, energy-saving efforts by the group's members have prevented the release into the atmosphere of 14,130 tons of carbon dioxide, according to Enerficiency, an energy consulting firm. Investments in new technology are projected to save the group's congregations nearly \$2 million “over the life of the new products,” Enerficiency said.

St. Elizabeth itself has reduced its peak energy demand by 60 percent over the last five years and has reduced its annual energy bills by \$20,000, Father Morris said.

Father Morris's interest in the environment was nurtured as he roamed farm land next to his childhood home in southern Ohio, times, he said, when he had “an experience of the divine.”

His readings and his degree in urban planning sharpened his awareness of global warming. And his faith buttresses his activism, he said. He notes that the [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#) has urged greater care of the environment. He cites Biblical passages, like Genesis 2:15, that call upon humans to care for God's creation.

Father Morris has found allies in poor urban churches and well-to-do mosques and synagogues in the suburbs. Rabbi Daniel Nevins of Adat Shalom Synagogue in Farmington Hills, a northwest suburb of Detroit, draws inspiration from many of the Bible passages Father Morris cites. Rabbi Nevins focuses much of his efforts on bringing environmental concerns into some of the worship at Adat Shalom.

At Yom Kippur, as part of a ritual when Jews admit their sins before God, Rabbi Nevins added a passage he wrote about the “sin of destroying God's creation.” As Jews celebrate the Sukkot holiday and sleep in temporary structures meant to evoke those that Jews lived in during their 40 years in the desert, they are also meant to see the beauty of nature and the fragility of their own existence, Rabbi Nevins said.

Still, it is slow going, he said. The sprawling Conservative synagogue has replaced many of its windows and lights and instituted a large recycling program, but Rabbi Nevins wants to do more. “There is not an active resistance, but people give lip service to environmental ideas and don’t change their lifestyle,” he said.

Many clergy members run into resistance stemming from theology, economics or politics. The Rev. Gerald Durley of Providence Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta, a largely African-American congregation, said that parishioners often thought of global warming as a distant issue, while problems like crime or the spread of [AIDS](#) must be tackled now.

Mr. Durley said he reminded them that in the early 1980s, many blacks dismissed AIDS as a remote issue, too, one that affected only gay white men.

Despite the February statement by prominent evangelicals about global warming, many in the pews remain unconvinced, often because they see it as an issue of the political left.

“When I give talks on environmental stewardship at Christian colleges, I have students look me in the eye and ask, ‘Is global warming real?’” said Dave Mahan, associate director of the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, a Christian environmental education organization headquartered in Grand Rapids, Mich. “I answer that God wants us to lead a stewardly life whether or not there is global warming.”

The Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, a Catholic religious order for women, used an opportunity to renovate their 73-year-old mother house in Monroe, Mich., to create a model of sustainable energy and water use.

The 376,000-square-foot building is heated and cooled by geothermal power, provided by some 240 wells dug on the order’s property. Water from sinks and showers, or “gray water,” is fed into a natural filtration and treatment system in a series of ponds and then recycled for use in toilets. Some lawns have been given over to natural meadows to reduce watering and mowing. Insulation is made of recycled materials. The building now saves \$200,000 annually in energy costs.

Some neighbors find the shaggy meadows unsightly. The city had to be persuaded to allow the gray water scheme. But the order, the average age of whose members at the mother house is 86, is also asked regularly to advise other groups, religious and secular, on building energy efficient facilities.

“We are recreating the monastery of old, where people come to learn how to live into the next century,” said Sister Janet Ryan, a member of the order’s leadership council. “Our dream is that the mother house serves as something of an ecological lab. For a bunch of elderly women, we have a huge agenda.”

Correction: Oct. 18, 2006

An article on Sunday about religious activism on global warming misstated the name of an Atlanta church whose minister, the Rev. Gerald Durley, said members often thought of global warming as a distant issue. It is Providence Missionary Baptist Church, not Providence Baptist Church.