



Green sermons taking root throughout the Southeast

By GREG BLUESTEIN, 11/26/07

The tall, tan pastor stood at the pulpit of his Baptist church on a recent Sunday morning, cleared his throat, and nervously proclaimed the following: First, he believes in God. And second, he believes in the Bible.

Robert Walker Jr.'s audience, a crowd of about 100 faithful parishioners, shuffled uncomfortably as he spoke, surely wondering why their pastor of a decade was offering up these disclaimers. But it didn't take long to figure out why.

Over the next few minutes, Walker told his flock that science contends that sixth century scholars wrote the Old Testament, but that it was still written with "divine spirit." It was his way of telling them that science and religion aren't always at odds.

"We can embrace God and Scripture and science together. And it's enough to say when they agree - and sometimes they do - we should embrace it. And they agree that our Earth cannot last forever. And that we are charged with the responsibility of taking care of it."

With that, there was another rustle in the crowd. And Peachtree Baptist Church had opened its two-month Sunday sermon series on the environment.

The congregation is one of 130 members of the local chapter of the Interfaith Power and Light movement, a group that tries to engage the faithful into environmental activism. And thanks to a recent spurt in environmental interest, similar chapters are springing up through the South.

"We try to engage faith communities to do just this - encourage their congregations to talk actively about the environment and

faith," said Jennifer Downs, the chapter's outreach coordinator. "We don't want this just to be a political conversation. Scientists won't be able to solve this by themselves." The chapter offers tips on low-energy care of church organs, sermon suggestions and hands out kits that encourage people that encourage greening through holidays. One program encourages people to switch to energy efficient light bulbs on each night they light a candle for Hanukkah or Advent.

The movement has quickly spread its roots throughout the Southeast. In Virginia, the chapter offers tips on how to incorporate environmental concerns into worship prayers. "Be gentle in interpreting these dangers, which can be frightening," offers one.

The North Carolina group presents a workshop that tackles global warming and energy efficiency, a message it highlights using Al Gore's global warming documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth," which it screened to about 100 churches in 2006. It has also trained about 150 pastors, rabbis and religious leaders to make politically neutral, scientifically sound statements in the context of their own religious faith.

"The greatest social movements of our time, from abolition to civil rights, didn't seem to take off until the religious community got involved," said Mark Ginsberg, the chapter's outreach coordinator.

Virginia's chapter has focused on developing a three-hour training program for congregations that asks participants to calculate their carbon footprints and pledge a 10 percent reduction, all through the context of religion.

"We want people faith-driven more so than issues driven," said the Rev. Pat Watkins, the chapter's director. "When the faith community gets on board, it's going to make a difference with how we treat the environment."

A movement called "Cool Congregations" is afoot in Tennessee, where members of different congregations meet at a community spot for a morning workshop to discuss the connection between faith and environment - and then spread the gospel to their houses of worship. The groups meet every few months to check in on progress.

"A lot of people are catching on with this in a big way," said the Rev. Jim Deming, who leads the Tennessee organization. "At some point, we're going to be overwhelmed by demand. In many ways the Southeast has been behind, but we really can't wait.

This is an immediate crisis."

The Georgia chapter counts more than two dozens member congregations, from synagogues to Unitarian churches.

Walker's Peachtree Baptist Church, a member of the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, seemed to take his sermon in stride. At the very least, he joked, none walked out or dropped out after he spoke. "I had to deconstruct what we've been taught," he said. "I've been here almost 10 years, so I feel like the church trusts me enough - even if they don't follow me, they'll hear me out." If the green movement is going to succeed, he wondered, why can't it find a home in the church? "Most churches are self-preserving and reactionary. Where's the proactivity? We're trying to set a tone for other churches."