



Taking Care Of God's Creation

Churches Take Lead In Environmental Awareness With Film Screenings And Discussions

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In the not-too-distant past, concern about global warming seemed to be confined mostly to scientists and environmentalists. But religious groups have now emerged to take the lead on environmental issues, particularly on global warming, citing responsible stewardship of the Earth as a matter of faith.

About 135 churches across Connecticut have sponsored showings of "An Inconvenient Truth," and almost as many have shown "The Great Warming," both films that sound the alarm on climate change and how it will affect life on Earth.

St. Bridget's Church in Manchester has held showings of both films, part of an overall effort by the congregation to become more energy-conscious, and to spread the word. After each showing, Eugene DeJoannis and other members could be seen handing out fliers promoting the use of compact fluorescent light bulbs and other energy-saving strategies.

"It might seem strange to be standing outside a church talking about electricity, but you would be surprised how many people we meet who don't know anything about the clean energy options they have," DeJoannis said.

The fliers also encourage consumers to sign up for Sterling Planet or Community Energy, one of two clean energy power systems available to Connecticut residents that promote use of solar panels, wind turbines and low-impact hydroelectricity.

"We are responsible for the planet and to turn it back to our children in at least the same condition that we got it," DeJoannis said. "We weren't given the Earth to rip it up and destroy it. We're supposed to care for it the way the creator cares for it."

"An Inconvenient Truth," which stars former Vice President Al Gore, has been shown by 4,000 congregations across the country in recent months. "The Great Warming," narrated by actor Keanu Reeves and singer Alanis Morissette, which opened in theaters nationwide Friday, was first distributed through churches and synagogues.

The campaign to show "Inconvenient Truth" and "Great Warming" in churches nationwide was coordinated by Interfaith Power and Light, a national ministry that grew out of a coalition of Episcopal churches.

"This campaign is the religious response to global warming," said the Rev. Sally Bingham, executive director of Interfaith Power and Light, based in San Francisco. "We who profess a love of God are called to be the stewards of creation."

Many congregations that signed up to show the film signed a covenant saying they would conduct energy

audits, switch to compact fluorescent bulbs, contact state leaders and devote one sermon to the issue, Bingham said.

The popularity of the films has raised awareness and a search for solutions, said Joan Benham, vice chairwoman of People's Action for Clean Energy. "I think it's the most important issue of our time." The group will host a panel discussion and clean-energy display, "Solutions to an Inconvenient Truth," Nov. 18 at the Unitarian Society in Hartford.

Every faith and denomination has something to say about care of the Earth in its sacred text, said Rabbi Andrea Cohen-Kiener, director of the Interreligious Eco-Justice Network, the local sponsor of the movie campaign. The organization has co-sponsored the annual "A Sacred Trust: A Forum on Religion and the Environment" with Hartford Seminary for eight years, and the second annual Environmental Justice Conference, both held in Hartford this month.

"The faith community brings the passion, the credibility and the numbers to make environmental consciousness pervasive in the general culture," Cohen-Kiener said. "The environment is one issue that is truly interfaith. We have everyone from evangelicals to Hasidim, Muslims and Catholics...it turns out that the Earth really is what we all have in common."

Global warming appears to have thawed the relationship between evangelical Christians and their liberal counterparts. Conservative leaders such as Richard Czik of the National Association of Evangelicals, who appears in the "The Great Warming," and Joel Hunter, president of the Christian Coalition, have joined the cause, though they have been criticized in conservative circles.

"We are trying to transcend the religious left-right divide on this issue," said the Rev. Tony Campolo, an evangelical pastor and emeritus professor at Eastern University. "The environment affects us all and the degradation of the environment affects the poor most of all."

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