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HEADLINE: Churches' faith down to Earth

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BODY:

Members of Unitarian Universalist Church in Elgin are planting prairie grasses around the church.

Congregants at Kingswood United Methodist Church in Buffalo Grove are making paper animals and carving doves from wood to encourage harmony between humans and nature.

The Messiah Lutheran Church, also in Elgin, is completing an energy audit and deciding whether to plant organic vegetation in its meditation garden.

Several churches in the northwest suburbs are at the forefront of a grass-roots religious movement to use energy and environmental resources more efficiently. In doing so, they hope to promote stewardship of the Earth as a moral obligation--and set an example for the government.

The Kyoto Protocol, a pact among 141 nations to slow global warming by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, went into effect Feb. 16. The U.S. is conspicuously missing from the consortium, which troubles environmentalists, some scientists and also theologians who believe respect of the Earth is a mandate from God.

"In Illinois we are working to mobilize a significant religious response to slow down climate change. We are encouraging energy conservation and creative use of renewable sources of power as a religious act. In taking these steps, we honor God's creation," said **Rev. Clare Butterfield**, director of Faith in Place, a Chicago group that seeks to engage local congregations in environmental conservation.

Two weeks ago, Butterfield was invited to address the membership of Countryside Unitarian Universalist Church in Palatine. Her sermon inspired them to start a group to explore how the church can be more environmentally aware, said Rev. Julie Denny-Hughes, the church's leader.

"One of the principles of the [Unitarian] church is respect for the environment," said Denny-Hughes. "In the larger sense we want to be an example for the community."

On March 5 at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Oak Park, Butterfield will present an environmental workshop that will be attended by representatives of a half-dozen area churches, including a Lutheran church in Rolling Meadows and a Catholic church in Elgin.

The following weekend, she will speak at Kingswood United Methodist Church in Buffalo Grove. The congregation is eager to learn how its members can be greener, said member Jane Grubb.

"We're looking for ways to tread more lightly on God's Earth," she said.

The Unitarian church in Elgin is a local leader in the environmental conservation effort.

It has traded incandescent light bulbs for the more energy-efficient compact fluorescent bulbs and spent thousands to plant native grasses, said Rev. Dan Brosier, the church's leader. Members are encouraged to drive slower and turn down their thermostats to produce less carbon dioxide, he said.

"We now have a friendly competition with the Unitarian church in Geneva" over the number of members driving hybrid cars, Brosier said.

With the threat of global warming, a growing consortium of religious groups, composed of moderate Catholics, Jews and Muslims; mainline Protestants; and evangelical Lutherans, is becoming vocal about the environment.

"Religious scholars are speaking out about the moral obligation of people of faith to be caretakers of the earth," said Rev. David Rhoads, professor of the New Testament at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. In the past, he said, many theologians ignored Scripture that emphasizes God's call to people of faith to be caretakers of the Earth.

Now many recognize there is biblical support for a God who values all creation, Rhoads said. In Psalms 104, for example, the emphasis is on God's delight for all creation, he said.

An October 2004 survey of religious Americans by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that concern for the environment cuts across virtually every religious group.

"There's a growing urgency among religious leaders and persons to advocate for the environment," said Butterfield, of Faith in Place. "People of faith are leading the way."

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