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Churches put their faith in God's Earth

A growing religious environmental movement takes many diverse forms across the country

By Maria Kantzavelos

Special to the Tribune

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Almost every Sunday at Wicker Park Lutheran Church, parishioners reach out with a special offering to some of God's smallest creatures.

On the red steps of the 98-year-old church, Lilly Ward rarely forgets to leave her contribution of egg shells, coffee grounds, used tea bags and banana and apple peels.

"I know the worms need to eat," Ward said before settling in for a recent Sunday service. "If I forget, then I dig in my garbage before I take it out."

The offerings of kitchen scraps are fed to hundreds of red worms in compost bins in the church's back yard. The fertilizer that is harvested is used in the church's community vegetable garden as well as in herb kits sold by an environmental group of children in the Logan Square and Humboldt Park neighborhoods.

The church is one of many Chicago-area congregations focusing on the environment, engaging in projects ranging from organic gardening and beekeeping to the purchase of energy-efficient fluorescent light bulbs and wind power.

Composting "is one of our missions as a church," said the pastor, Rev. Ruth VanDemark. "We as human beings are stewards of the environment."

The commitment to organic gardening is a project of Faith in Place, an interfaith organization that works with Chicago-area religious leaders on environmental issues.

The network consists of 85 congregations in Chicago and its suburbs and represents a broad spectrum of faiths, including Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, Baha'i, Zoroastrian and Buddhist.

The Chicago-area projects are examples of a growing faith-based environmental movement nationwide.

"They really are starting to see that the application of faith requires that they live within the boundaries, the limitations of nature," said Rev. Clare Butterfield, director of Faith in Place. "Those are God's physical limits, as it were, as much as the moral limits. We have to be just in the way that we share resources."

The Unity Temple in Oak Park, where Butterfield is a minister, is among a handful of churches in the Chicago area that recently committed to the purchase of wind power.

The Unitarian Universalist congregation in January started paying an additional \$25 per month on its electric bill for 1,000 kilowatt hours of electricity from wind power produced by the Mendota Hills Wind Farm in Lee County, Illinois' first large wind farm.

The money pays for wind certificates that represent new wind power put into the local power grid on the congregation's behalf.

"By paying that slight premium, they're saying, We're going to replace a third of the electricity we draw from the grid with wind power," Butterfield said. "Those who purchase the certificates are ensuring that it is profitable for this wind farm to operate, so that the next one gets built."

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Butterfield said other area congregations have followed suit, including Ebenezer Lutheran Church on the city's North Side, Unitarian Church of Hinsdale and Pilgrim Congregational Church in Oak Park.

The Chicago-area interfaith environmental effort extends to the Muslim community. Starting in Bridgeview, organizers are launching a pilot program involving small and medium-size Illinois farms to develop a branded product of meat that is humanely and naturally raised while being certified as halal, meaning it meets the dietary restrictions of the Islamic faith.

A faith-based environmental awakening is growing steadily, said Paul Gorman, director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment.

"What is striking to me about it is the very profoundly religious dimension of it," Gorman said. "This is coming from people's deep faiths, beliefs and traditions" at a time when "the crisis of God's creation at the hand of God's children is so clearly a global challenge."

Leaders of many major religions in recent years have issued official theological declarations about environmental stewardship, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Patriarch Bartholomew, the "green patriarch" who is the leader of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians.

Gorman's group knows of about 2,000 congregations nationwide that have integrated programs addressing the environment, he said. Also, he said, interfaith global-warming and energy campaigns have been established in 21 states.

In observance of Earth Day on April 22, more than 100,000 congregations throughout the country are expected to receive mailings on clean-air policy from the National Council of Churches of Christ, an ecumenical partnership of 36 Christian denominations.

"It's very religious and very diverse, sometimes taking national forms and sometimes in the very local way," Gorman said. "I think it's about the future of religious life itself: What does it mean to be a faithful Christian or a faithful Jew?"

When it comes to being good stewards of the Earth, many people look to scripture for guidance, examining the creation story and the meaning behind the idea of man's dominion over all of God's creatures.

"Dominion in the old-fashioned way of doing what you want with it just isn't working anymore," Gorman said. "Humankind as a species is awakening to the impact we're having on every living creature."

Butterfield stressed that the idea of man's dominion goes hand-in-hand with the belief that human beings are created in the divine image.

"If we are in the likeness of God and we have dominion, then surely we must have dominion in the way that reflects God," Butterfield said. "God's dominion over us is not exploitive; it's loving and caring."

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