

Times Union (Albany, N.Y.)

24. Preaching ecological salvation Faith spurring congregations into advocacy

Date: Monday, January 14, 2008

Section: Main

Edition: 1

Page: A1

Illustration: Photo

Caption: PHOTOS BY PHILIP KAMRASS/TIMES UNION ED BENNETT is president of New York Interfaith Power and Light, which helps houses of worship become more energy-efficient.

ED BENNETT adjusts a new energy- efficient thermostat at Jonesville United Methodist Church in Clifton Park.

By JULIE A. **VARUGHESE**

Special to the Times Union

Houses of worship are taking on the roles of educator and advocate for the environment amid concerns about climate change and whether they'll leave a cleaner Earth to future generations.

Some local congregations sell energy-efficient light bulbs. Others are showing films to teach worshippers about environmental issues. Then there are the environmentally friendly palm fronds. "Within each (congregation), it's very clear people feel the world is not ours to destroy and that we have a responsibility, having been put here, to take care of the world that we've been given temporarily," said Lew Morrison, chairman of the environmental committee at Congregation Beth Shalom, a synagogue in Clifton Park.

Morrison also is chairman of the environmental coalition committee of the United Jewish Federation of Northeastern New York. In October, he began the Saratoga County Interfaith Environmental Coalition so houses of worship could discuss ways to combat climate change. It is made up of five churches and synagogues.

Steve Kent, spokesman for the Garrison Institute, a nonprofit group in Putnam County that melds spirituality and social justice, said there always have been examples of environmental activism among faith communities.

But the movement has picked up speed in the last few years. Former Vice President Al Gore's 2006 documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth," and news about catastrophic weather and melting polar ice caps catapulted the issue into the collective conscience.

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Clifton Park was ahead of the curve - it has had an environmental committee for 13 years. The committee raises money to send a member child to an environmental camp each summer, and has asked the church to buy eco-friendly palms from the tropics for celebrating Palm Sunday, according to Chairwoman Marilyn Kellar.

It also hosts guest speakers and movie nights featuring environmental films.

Congregation Beth Shalom sells compact fluorescent light bulbs as part of a nationwide program of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, and is part of a coalition of synagogues looking to buy renewable power for their buildings.

Members also spent a weekend in September with local synagogues discussing the environment.

Shelly Shapiro, director of community relations for the United Jewish Federation of Northeastern New York, said each synagogue has a social-action group that may incorporate environmental activism and education.

At Jonesville United Methodist Church in Clifton Park, congregants were encouraged to give compact fluorescent light bulbs as alternative Christmas presents. Ed Bennett, a congregant who volunteers to oversee energy use in the building, also taught a class on going on a "low-carbon diet," or leading a lifestyle that has a minimal environmental impact.

Unlike secular environmental groups, members of faith-based environmental groups say they feel they have more clout in the political arena because they represent a wider swath of the population.

"In the United States, one has to say that the faith-based community as a whole is certainly middle America," Morrison said.

Assemblyman Bob Reilly, D-Colonie, said he was surprised when Congregation Beth Shalom's environmental committee met with him to express their concerns.

"If you're an Assembly person, if an environmental group talks about the

environment, you expect that. If a union comes in to talk about union issues, you expect that. If a Jewish congregation speaks about the environment, you say, 'Wait - how is this connected?' I found it refreshing."

Responsibility for Earth appears as a major theme in various religious texts. The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life explains it uses certain Jewish values such as "tikkun olam" (repairing the Earth for the next generation) to rationalize its cause.

The Koran explains that a clean natural environment cannot be separated from spiritual cleanliness.

And, as the saying goes, "Cleanliness is next to godliness."

But differences of opinion on the environment also arise in houses of worship.

On the environmental committee at Congregation Beth Shalom, members do not always agree on the significance of planting a "green garden" or questions about power sources for the masses.

"That's something all environmental committees struggle with," Morrison said. "Some people are against nuclear (power) and some people say, 'If you rule out nuclear, you're not going to make it.' "

Bennett of Jonesville United Methodist, who is also president of New York Interfaith Power and Light, a nonprofit group that helps houses of worship throughout the state become more energy-efficient, said congregations can be the catalyst for change.

"The church itself becomes the messenger to its members to the opportunities that exist for energy conservation and stewardship," he said. Bennett said saving \$5,000 a year in energy costs introduced energy conservation efforts to some climate-change skeptics in his church.

Members sometimes want their congregation to start lobbying politicians, but Morrison said as a religious group, it can't advocate. It can, however, educate.

"It brings a wealth of information for all the people involved," he said.

Julie Varughese, an environmental journalism fellow, can be reached at 454-5587 or by e-mail at jvarughese@timesunion.com.

Factbox: Eco-Education

Jan. 24: 7 p.m. "Renewal," a documentary film about the efforts of people of various faiths working to stop environmental degradation. The Garrison Institute, Route 9D, Garrison, Putnam County. Call (845) 424-4800 or go to <http://www.garrisoninstitute.org>. Jan. 27: noon to 4 p.m. The Saratoga County Interfaith Environmental Coalition hosts Steven Leibo, professor at The Sage Colleges and a documentary filmmaker, who will show the "Climate Crisis" slide show from former Vice President Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" at Shenendehowa High School East Little Theatre. Call SCIEC program director Lisa Haun, 330-6703.