

## **Mother Nature gets a faithful hand; Religious groups take up**

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Years after congregations across the nation "went green," incorporating ecology with theology remains an earthly challenge.

Despite taking advantage of April as Earth Month and doing things such as using low-energy lights and participating in highway cleanups, some believe the faith community hasn't done enough.

"If we are a faith-based group, we are going to have to change our emphasis," said the retired Rev. Dave Steffenson, acting executive director of the Wisconsin Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaign. "We're way behind in motivating people of faith."

"It can take a lot of effort to keep peoples' attention focused on these issues, but it relates to such fundamental teachings of religion," said Peter Bakken, a coordinator for public policy for the Wisconsin Council of Churches in Sun Prairie.

Paul Gorman, executive director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment in Amherst, Mass., said congregations historically have tended to focus on social justice issues and didn't consider environmental issues part of their mission. But he said an increasing number of churches and congregations in Wisconsin are marrying spirituality and environmental activism, reflecting a national trend.

The Partnership for the Environment says it has enlisted about 5,000 clergy and lay members in the Catholic, Jewish, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant and Evangelical communities as leaders.

"More and more people understand that environmental problems have deep moral and spiritual meanings," Gorman said. "We have to have a greater understanding of our role in the web of creation."

Consider Huda Alkaff's experience. After completing a doctorate in ecology at the University of Georgia, Alkaff moved to West Bend and formed the Islamic Environmental Group of Wisconsin about two years ago. It's a grass-root initiative that intends to educate other Muslims and join other interfaith groups on environmental stewardship.

The group is starting to bud: It focuses on Qur'anic verses on caring for God's creation and works with other congregations on environmentally friendly projects.

Other faith groups are taking action as well.

On Tuesday, for example, Rabbi Jay Brickman, who serves Congregation Sinai in Milwaukee, discussed "Nature and the Book of Psalms" at the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center in Bayside. Tree plantings and other presentations were planned throughout the area.

At the Hindu Temple of Wisconsin, prayers and festivals have long been offered for the environment. The temple also has regular cleanups on site.

And at St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Racine, Pastor Carol Baumgartner is in the midst of guiding parishioners through "a season of creation," which is a three-year cycle of infusing more ecology into religion.

Earlier this year, St. Andrew conducted environmental surveys throughout the congregation. When the church learned that its lighting wasn't ecologically friendly, it switched. The church also plans to start a garden and use food from the garden for its food bank and is planning a workshop on the environment for other Lutheran churches in the fall.

"This is an ongoing thing that we are just getting started," Baumgartner said. "I'd like to be able to do it more."

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