

Churches go green: Leaders cite both spiritual and financial motives

by Lee A. Dean | Special to the Kalamazoo Gazette

Gazette Lyle Smith, building maintenance man for St. Thomas More Catholic Student Parish in Kalamazoo, holds a spare compact fluorescent light bulb, right, used to replace the incandescent light bulbs for artificial room lighting. KALAMAZOO --Caring for the Earth and reducing energy expenses are two of the reasons some Kalamazoo-area churches are focusing on going green. Their moves may be small, such as eliminating the use of plastic-foam coffee cups. Or they may be major, such as including energy-efficient features in construction projects, as St. Thomas More Catholic Student Parish in Kalamazoo has done. In either case, the goals are the same, says a St. Thomas More parishioner. "We have a moral obligation to look after creation, because we have an effect on other people," said Claire McSwiney, a scientist at the Michigan State University Kellogg Biological Station, in Hickory Corners. Unity of Kalamazoo, a spiritual community that draws on many religious traditions, has made a series of moves toward going green and continues to do so, said its minister, the Rev. Marty Newman. A partial list:

- All plastics in the church hospitality coffee shop and kitchen have been eliminated.
- Regular attendees bring their own coffee cups from home. Visitors drink from paper coffee cups.
- Paper bulletins and orders of service have been eliminated in favor of PowerPoint slide presentations. Unity encourages use of the church Web site to get information, helping to reduce the volume of printed materials by 75 percent.
- As old light bulbs burn out, new, energy-efficient bulbs are installed.
- Energy-saving spotlights and floodlights, along with dimmer switches, have been installed. North Presbyterian Church in Kalamazoo also has made the move away from plastic-foam cups and has taken other small steps. One major move was replacing its old furnace, which was at the end of its useful life, with an energy-efficient unit. "The new furnace has saved us a lot of money in natural gas," said the Rev. Linda Cook McDonald, North's minister. "The gas company was so shocked they figured they had better come and read the meter."

Energy efficiency, education

St. Thomas More has tackled the green issue on two fronts: in a recent building-addition project and through parish education. The building project, completed in 2008, included installation of low-flow toilets, energy-efficient light bulbs, energy-efficient water systems for landscaping and programmable heating and lighting controls. Whenever possible, natural materials were used throughout the building. "All that made it easy to argue that if we were going to have this green building, then we as a community needed to start behaving differently," McSwiney said. For the past two years, McSwiney has organized "Green Lent" activities designed to educate parishioners and give them a way to monitor their progress in becoming environmentally friendly.

Gazette Lyle Smith, building maintenance man for St. Thomas More Catholic Student Parish in Kalamazoo, sweeps the floor in the sanctuary without the need for electrical lighting. This year's focus was on reducing church members' carbon footprints. People kept track of their progress by filling out "green cards." The cards include suggestions such as shopping with reusable cloth bags instead of paper or plastic ones, building and using a compost pile, buying food in bulk and changing from paper napkins to cloth napkins. McSwiney used bulletin inserts and set up a bulletin board to suggest examples of how people could reduce their carbon footprints. "They could see that this was easy to do. There was a range of ways to get something done," McSwiney said.

Spiritual motives

The "green church" movement is clearly motivated in part by spirituality. For instance, the efforts at St. Thomas More are part of a national Catholic initiative centered on "The St. Francis Pledge to Care for Creation and the Poor." This pledge urges Catholics to learn and educate others about climate change, assess how people and organizations contribute to it and then act to change personal choices and behaviors. At Unity, the green movement is "absolutely part of our spiritual responsibility," Newman said. "We consider that we are all one with all living beings on the Earth and with the Earth. Whatever we do that hurts everyone else on the Earth hurts us. We're trying to be more responsible in that regard."

Financial concerns

Many churches in the United States also are making the move toward green to reduce costs, according to a recent Religion News Service report. "In this economy, I have noticed that most of them (Episcopal parishes) have some version of a green committee ... at their church," said Cynthia Cannon, executive director of the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes, based in Austin, Texas. Even churches of conservative traditions that were opposed to going green may get there sooner than they thought because of the need to save money, said Simeon May, chief executive officer of the National Association of Church Business Administration. "There has been an aversion to going green and a belief that global warming is a hoax and a myth and ... trying to go green is not scriptural," said May, whose organization includes congregations with at least 500 weekly worshippers. "In this economy, that doesn't seem to hold water anymore."

Religion News Service writer Adelle M. Banks contributed to this report.