

Catholics take lead in sustainability

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For a century or two, the spires of Catholic churches could be seen rising above city neighborhoods or as the highest point below the grain elevator in small towns. Those spires symbolized the values, spirituality and community to be found in the parish church and its school. Today some feel Catholic parishes and other communities could become seedbeds for a wider embrace of earth-friendly practices, and they are making that happen.

In his World Day of Peace message this year Pope Benedict XVI asked, "Can we remain indifferent before the problems associated with such realities as climate change, desertification, the deterioration and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas, the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase of natural catastrophes, and the deforestation of equatorial and tropical regions?"

In their 1995 pastoral, "At Home in the Web of Life," the Appalachian Catholic bishops asked: "Now might not our own Christian communities themselves become small centers of a sustainable path, small islands of creativity, proclaimers of a culture of life?"

The Richmond, Va., diocese has hired an ecological educator, Susan L. Hedge, who formulated a process for parishes within the diocese and put together a section on the diocesan Web site to guide parishes in the process of becoming green.

"Saving money is a worthy goal and saving the earth," Hedge counsels. "But let us go a step beyond and become examples to the larger community. Your parish can become a light to the world, a city set on a mountain."

The diocese of Des Moines, Iowa, with the cooperation of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference and statewide interfaith climate-change groups, recently conducted workshops for parish staff and lay leaders and distributed to each parish DVDs of the workshops to raise awareness and invite common action by Catholics in the diocese on global climate change and related energy issues. Workshops focused on understanding Iowa's contributions to greenhouse gas emissions through energy use and opportunities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through agricultural products and on reducing energy use in parishes and Catholic homes.

In the San Jose, Calif., diocese, Bishop Patrick McGrath launched the Catholic Green Initiative in early 2009. It's an effort involving the diocese, Catholic Charities, Santa Clara University and the Presentation Retreat and Conference Center. University students are creating educational materials for diocesan use and will undertake a greenhouse gas inventory of the diocese. The university had already conducted a greenhouse gas emissions analysis for Baltimore-based Catholic Relief Services. The diocese is promoting solar-powered parishes to reduce their carbon footprints. Currently, five San Jose parishes are participating. Solar panels are being placed wherever parishes have space for the panels to effectively gather sunlight. When completed, each system will provide about 70 percent of the parish's annual electrical needs for the next the 30 years.

The first page of our special section on ecology features nine steps any parish can take to begin the process of

becoming a sustainable church community. These steps can help reduce energy bills, tackle climate change, and build a greener future.

The National Catholic Rural Life Conference, based in Des Moines, has established an area on its Web site that lists dioceses, parishes, schools and religious communities that are making efforts at sustainability and ecological education. Catholic religious communities of women and men have historically created new patterns of leading a moral and sustainable life.

We applaud these efforts at the diocesan and parish level to form new, innovative relationships with creation and encourage others to join in.

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