

New study says religions can boost environmentalism

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by Jan Nunley – Episcopal News Service

A new Worldwatch Institute study says religious institutions can provide a needed boost to environmental protection and sustainable development advocates--if both groups can overcome what the report called "mutual misperceptions and divergent worldviews."

The report, published in December, 2002, points to a number of partnerships between the two groups, including the Episcopal Church's own Regeneration Project in California, which promotes energy efficiency and "green energy" among individuals and congregations.

Author Gary Gardner, director of research at Worldwatch, a Washington, D.C.-based environmental think tank, said a close collaboration of religious institutions and environmentalists "could change the world. These groups have different but complementary strengths."

"Environmentalists have a strong grounding in science. Religious institutions enjoy moral authority and a grassroots presence that shape the worldviews and lifestyles of billions of people," Gardner said. "It's a powerful combination that until recently remained virtually unexplored."

Shared interests

According to Gardner, environmentalists and people of faith share important interests. "Each looks at the world from a moral perspective; each views nature as having value that surpasses economics; and each opposes excessive consumption," the report stated.

Religions, he said, possess one or more of five "sources of power," which include the ability to shape people's worldviews and wield moral authority, have the ear of multitudes of adherents, possess strong financial and institutional assets, and generate so-called "social capital", an asset in community building. "All of these assets can be used to help build a socially just and environmentally sustainable world," Gardner wrote.

What gets in the way are concerns by environmentalists over the "checkered history" of religious groups with regard to "the role of women, the nature of truth, and the moral status of humanity in the natural order," Gardner pointed out. Similarly, for people of faith, environmentalists may represent a secularist "narrow-minded righteousness" that refuses to recognize the importance of the spiritual.

Gardner observed with approval that Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has already made "curbing the culture of consumption" a major focus of his ministry. But, he noted gloomily, "despite centuries of experience preaching against the illusion of satisfaction provided

by earthly wealth, religion in industrial countries is struggling in its efforts to counter the consumerist tide."

Episcopalian energy

Gardner's report pointed out several examples of cooperation among advocates of religious and environmental concerns.

California's Regeneration Project, an initiative of the Episcopal Church, includes Episcopal Power and Light (EP&L), started in 1996 when the Rev. Sally Bingham realized that she might capitalize on the state's deregulation of energy to persuade the state's Episcopalians to choose energy generated from renewable sources such as wind, geothermal, and biomass.

The Regeneration Project now includes California Interfaith Power and Light, which does political advocacy to promote renewable energy. "In its short life, the Regeneration Project has spread to seven states, and it could have a substantial effect on energy consumption patterns if adopted by religious groups and adherents nationwide," Gardner wrote. "In addition to offering a shot in the arm for emerging renewable energy companies, the project could help boost energy conservation."

Lower energy use raises awareness

The project also encourages participating parishes to undertake an energy audit of their buildings. Gardner reported that an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) survey of commercial buildings calculates that "an energy efficiency upgrade of the country's 269,000 houses of worship, which account for about 5 percent of US commercial building floor space, would prevent 6 million tons of carbon dioxide from being released to the atmosphere, while saving congregations more than \$500 million."

He said the savings in carbon emissions would constitute only "a tiny fraction" of U.S. carbon emissions, but that "the real returns would come from enlisting congregant support for similar conservation activities in their homes."

"The 44 percent of the American public who regularly visit a church, synagogue, or mosque constitutes a huge pool of potential converts to energy efficiency and green energy sources, especially if efforts to green the church are accompanied by efforts to raise consciousness among congregants, as in the EP&L program," Gardner said.

--The Rev. Jan Nunley is deputy director of Episcopal News Service.