

Setting Up an Environmental Ministry in Your House of Worship

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Overview:

This guide offers a fairly simple way of setting up an environmental ministry in your house of worship. Since environmental ministries are new to some congregations, this guide contains a section each on the *Faith Principles* behind Creation Care and the *Current Environmental Situation*. The *Implementation* angle, especially the groundwork involved, aims to create fruitful, encouraging discussion throughout all major areas of the congregation including members, leadership, other ministries and congregational staff. This will ensure that the environmental ministry receives the support of all stakeholders, guaranteeing broad ownership and viability.

The sections on *Ministry Structure* and *Proposed Ministry Activities* are, of course, suggestions. There are a myriad of ways to set up a ministry structure and for the activities that it will present. Likewise, the setting up of the structure and some of the initial activities will overlap with one another. These sections will truly come alive and be complemented by the ideas and discussions that will arise from the people who come forth to set up this ministry.

Please note that, while an “environmental ministry” or “Green Team” may appear to be a new, separate ministry, it is not. Since environmental issues are deeply related to other issues such as public health, poverty, food insecurity, and the economy, you will be able to see a natural relationship with a Green Team and some of the ministries your house of worship may already have in place.

Faith Principles:

Environmental stewardship is a principle tenant of all major religions. There are many religious statements, as well as passages from sacred texts. These include:

I would like to ask all those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political and social life, and all men and women of goodwill: let us be 'protectors' of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment. — Pope Francis

Excessive pollution from fossil fuels threatens to destroy the gifts bestowed on us by God, whom we know as Allah – gifts such as a functioning climate, healthy air to breathe, regular seasons, and living oceans. But our attitude to these gifts has been short-sighted and we have abused them. What will future generations say of us, who leave them a degraded planet as our legacy? – from the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change

To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. . . for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands . . . for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life, with poisonous substances . . . these are sins. — Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I

Global warming is not just a scientific or political issue – it is a moral issue. It is time for the moral voice of religion to speak up loudly to demand action. – Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

The impact of climate change will fall disproportionately on those who have contributed the least to this problem – the world's poor. Jesus said, 'What you do unto the least of these, you do to me.' – The Rev. Dr. Joel C. Hunter, Board of Directors, National Association of Evangelicals

Special Point of Concern:

The subject of creation care, like every other subject having to do with the social arena, will be criticized by some in your congregation. A favorite criticism is that ‘there is no room for politics in the religious sphere.’

Caring for the environment will especially meet with charges of this type in light of the fact that it is a very sensitive issue for some folks and has been represented as strongly partisan in the realm of politics and the media.

Tip:

When speaking to anyone about any social issue, stay away from painting the issue in a political light. Listen respectfully to all opinions, especially those who differ from or who do not understand your religion's principles of environmental stewardship. Gently confirm to people that action is based on the sacred writings and traditions of your faith tradition, which mandate care for all of life. You may mention the inter-connectedness of caring for Earth to the many issues that your congregation is engaged in, such as public health and the economy. An excellent short video demonstrating the intimate relationship of environmental challenges and multiple health, financial and social issues features Rev. Dr. Ambrose Carroll, Sr. and Brother G.L. Hodge. In the video, they outline the inspiring work done by some faith communities in responding to the climate crisis, and working for healthier communities in the process.¹

Current Environmental Situation:

Multiple scientific reports and lived experience have demonstrated the current environmental situation. The basic problem is an accelerated build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, mainly from the burning of fossil fuels (oil, coal and natural gas), deforestation, animal grazing, and the thawing of permafrost. The earth's temperature has risen an average of 1.3 degrees Fahrenheit, reflected by much warmer temperatures in some areas such as the Arctic region and cooler temperatures in other areas. Global effects include melting of the Arctic glaciers; change of rainfall patterns in many areas; increased incident of drought in areas such as the African Sahel, which is already vulnerable to famine; and stronger weather events, affecting lives and livelihoods.

A strong focus of many faith groups is the effect of regional climate change and environmental situations on local communities. Environmental justice issues are increasingly supported by whole coalitions of organizations, including houses of worship and clergy leaders.² The American Lung Association, in its State of the Air 2016 Report ranks several areas in California as the hardest-hit by pollution in the country.³

There are a number of California legislative initiatives that aim to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases. These include Assembly Bill 32 (AB 32) passed in 2006, which aims to reduce California's greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020; Senate Bill 32, passed in 2016 that will reduce emissions 40% below 1990 levels by 2030; and Assembly Bill 1550, which ensures a percentage of Climate Investment funds going to the most disadvantaged areas of the state.

Special Points of Concern:

There are some persons who state that climate change is not happening or, if it is happening, it is a natural cycle not related to human activity. Discussions can easily devolve into heated arguments over science to the point that common ground is lost.

Tip:

Many folks come at environmental care from different points of view. Be careful that discussions do not fall astray to the point that environmental care becomes too difficult to undertake. Continue to focus on your sacred writings and principles as the basis for action. An excellent faith principle, common to all major religious traditions is the protection of all life. Environmental care, as stated several times, is deeply integrated with many major issues in which the protection of life is the rationale for action.

Implementation: First Steps

The implementation of this or any other ministry needs to first begin with building a common vision among many congregational members. The most ideal situation is to have several people or groups from various

ministries support creating such an initiative. This will lead to idea-gathering, brainstorming and the creation of shared excitement and ownership.

To build a congregation-wide ground-swell, first form a group of people interested in starting this ministry. These people, ideally, (but not necessarily) will be representative of the various groups within the congregation. This group will meet a few times to discuss strategies on how best to communicate, consult with and motivate others to form the environmental ministry. Far from being “the experts”, these people will ask others their ideas of how to implement the ministry and what they would like to see in it. Discussions may take place in a variety of settings – one-on-one informal conversations, at a ministry meeting, and at all-staff meetings. It is important that as many people as possible are made part of the discussion; problems arise when people feel they were “left out” by not being consulted.

Special Point of Concern:

Pay particular attention to the leader of your house of worship. Make sure they feel that their voice is heard in the formation of this ministry. This leader may have strong feelings pro or con about the formation of this ministry and may have very good ideas about it. Discussion with the leader should happen early in the process with the originating group. Though the congregational head may have the authority to “nix” a proposed ministry before it sees the light of day, showing the support of many interested parties will lend credence to the idea that the ministry will enjoy broad support.

Tip:

Get to know the head of your house of worship. All leaders, like people, are very different. Some love every idea that is brought to them and they give members “free reign” for almost every initiative. Others want to manage the congregation’s activities very closely. Some are socially conservative, others are socially progressive. When speaking to your leader, be as respectful as possible and provide the opportunity to voice any concerns they feel about the formation and content of the ministry. In addition, showing support for this ministry will let the leader know that they will not be responsible for the running of the ministry; it will not be just one more thing on their plate.

Ministry Structure:

PLEASE NOTE: There are a myriad of different way in which you can set up an Environmental Ministry. *The main point is that it survives beyond changes in clergy and lay leaders.* In addition, there are different ways in which houses of worship function. Some faith traditions already have a national environmental initiative that will be able to provide excellent guidance. The following, therefore, is only one way in which this type of ministry can be set up, and includes the following:

- Development of Mission Statement
- Running of ministry, including official ministry name; responsibilities and terms of “officials” (such as Chair.)
- Joint decisions of how often to meet

Please note that consulting with other houses of faith, which have an existing environmental ministry, is a good way to share information and to avoid some potential pitfalls. It is always important to seek wisdom from other congregations so as not to ‘re-invent the wheel.’

Special Points of Concern:

As with almost any work or personal situation, setting up a new ministry, including the implementation process, can be a daunting task. There will be many different people involved with many different opinions. Decision-making can be difficult. Agendas for meetings can easily go off-topic with strong personalities and trivial details.

Tip:

Joint-visioning and the original rationale for setting up the environmental ministry must always be at the forefront. When folks hold on to a common vision for which each individual had a role in creating, details of how to make that vision a reality are easier to work out. In addition, committee members must keep in mind that it is not their individual ego that is important but the purpose of sustaining Creation. Choosing a chairperson who is adept at consensus-building, effective meeting facilitation and decision-making is very important in this process.

Proposed Ministry Activities:

A suggested first event is to have a workshop in which the whole congregation is invited, perhaps after a service or another time during the week. The topics of environmental stewardship and faith, local effects of poor air quality, and/or current science may be presented along with time for question and answer and suggestions/comments. This is an excellent opportunity to integrate the parish community on a large scale and also to sign up new ministry members.

Subsequent events will depend on the ideas and passions that people bring to the committee. The following is a suggested list based upon other Environmental Ministries in other houses of prayer and faith organizations:

- Regional effects of regional climate change and poor air quality with a follow-up campaign
- Parish and home recycling program
- Workshops on topics such as energy efficiency, the science of climate change and sustainable energies
- A forum on inter-faith dialogue of environmental stewardship with follow-up aimed at inter-faith dialogue and action, communication and network expansion
- “Movie Nights” featuring documentaries on environmental issues (e.g., Chasing Ice)
- A “Sustain Creation Day” twice a year with handouts on simple energy-saving techniques for the home, speakers before/after service, and/or hosting a speaker.
- Legislative campaigns in support of existing and proposed local, state, and/or federal energy and climate legislation.
- More excellent information on event ideas and energy efficiency can be found at California Interfaith Power & Light – interfaithpower.org.

Special Points of Concern:

With the Environmental Ministry, as with any ministry, committee members may be very passionate about the subject. They may have very good intentions but become a little misguided in their intentions. Social action may turn into a symbol of very vocal action mixed with a sense of righteous anger.

Tip:

Any social activist may fall prey to the above concerns. There are two distinct ways to keep action focused. First and most important, since this is within a religious setting, prayer must be the basis of all action. Every meeting must open with a prayer. Second, actions taken must be not merely *against* something, but *for* something. For example, many people may be against continuing oil-independence but, in their vocal protests, must present a *working alternative* to it. This working toward an alternative accomplishes two things: one, it lends credence to the social effort and two; it provides the larger community and leaders a working alternative which may be integrated into future plans.

NOTES:

1 Rev. Ambrose’s video, accessed 02.13.17

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4TZs4N3gmM&feature=youtube_gdata_player

2 Rev. Ken Chambers on No Coal in Oakland Campaign – accessed 02.13.17

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXRJEAKHdIU6gBR_f_OPeow

3 American Lung Association’s State of the Air Report 2016, accessed 02.13.17

<http://www.lung.org/about-us/media/press-releases/2016-state-of-the-air.html>