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Area churches embracing creation care

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Contributor

After the April 30 explosion of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, some of the first groups to step forward and help with clean-up efforts were faith-based organizations. General environmental concerns and these recent ecological disasters have solidified many groups' commitments to earth stewardship.

Stewardship of the earth is a biblical tenet, which various denominations interpret in different ways. While some religious groups look at God's "gift" of the earth to man as an indication that he intended for man to use the earth as he sees fit, others see the "gift" as an enormous duty; one in which man has the opportunity and responsibility to honor God by providing stewardship of the earth.

The Rev. Reed Hopkins of Churchville's Loch Willow Presbyterian Church said he frequently preaches stewardship of the earth.

"Often, from the pulpit, I've compared care of the earth to care for our bodies. There are Christians who say that environmentalists are pagan 'earth worshippers,' or that we're putting too much emphasis on a planet which is not meant to last for eternity," Hopkins said. "But almost all Christians agree that we are called to take care of our bodies, as 'God's temples.' Living a clean, healthy life does not mean you worship your body. And even though our bodies will not last more than a few decades, we have a duty to keep them healthy while we're in them. Likewise, keeping the earth clean, healthy and livable is not earth worship; it's simply taking care of our home while we have it. Respect for creation shows respect for the Creator who called it good."

Other denominations advocate environmental issues in a host of different ways. Long committed to environmental conservation, the international Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations specifies earth stewardship in its denomination's creed. According to its website, the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism include, "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

In 1989, UUA members from around the world formed an association, now called Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth, to promote and facilitate environmental efforts. The group provides information and guidance to individual congregations on matters of ecology and environmentalism.

When they recently renovated their worship space, members of Waynesboro's UU Fellowship took environmental concerns into account in their decisions. The Rev. Ed Piper said the congregation's decision not to install air conditioning was two-fold. The desire to lessen the building's environmental impact, combined with a significantly reduced operating cost were key factors in the decision.

"During the summer months, we begin our Sunday service one hour earlier than during the rest of the year, so that conditions in the Fellowship Hall are a bit cooler for our members," Piper said.

Focusing their earth stewardship beliefs on areas of need outside the Shenandoah Valley, groups from the UU Fellowship traveled to New Orleans five times to help with the cleanup and housing recovery efforts after Hurricane Katrina.

Five years later, the eyes of the environmentally aware are back on the Gulf coast region and the continuing oil leak.

Trinity Episcopal Church will conduct a prayer vigil for the Gulf region at 4:30 p.m. today. Paul Bugas, chairman of Trinity's Environmental Stewardship Committee, describes the outreach event as a series of readings and prayers around themes of water, pollution, restoration and forgiveness.

Formed in June 2009, Trinity's Environmental Stewardship Committee has examined ways in which the church can lessen its impact on the environment. Bugas said the Committee was the Rev. Paul Nancarrow's idea.

"Our rector felt strongly that Trinity become educated and involved with environmental activities," he said.

Commitment to environmental efforts and nature preservation is a priority for Trinity's members.

"Many of our parishioners like to hike, canoe, kayak, fish, hunt, bicycle, and generally are very appreciative of what a beautiful place the Shenandoah Valley is," Bugas said.

Love of the outdoors is one reason the congregation celebrated Earth Day this year with three weeks of programs called the Earth Day Sunday School Rotation. The rotation included various lessons about the environment. Bugas described the programs as "creating a tapestry that amplified the artistic talents of our youth," he said. "It all came together in a final gathering expressed in song, Scripture and art."

After first ramping up their church's recycling efforts to include paper, aluminum, plastic, batteries and small electronic devices, the Trinity committee members researched more efficient outdoor lighting for the church grounds. The group plans to schedule an energy audit to determine what other measures can be taken to improve the building's energy efficiency, which will not only contribute to conservation efforts, but also will save the Parish money by lowering the building's life cycle costs. Saving money here will allow the church to contribute more to clean water projects at its mission sites in Honduras and Haiti. In this way, members of the local congregation hope to cause a far-reaching ripple effect of environmental awareness, education and earth stewardship.
