

Eco-Spirituality for Liberal Religious Communities

A Sermon by David Cockrell

Imagine for a moment a church community that had a fundamental, bottom-line commitment to living in harmony with the earth.

The program of such a church would be continuously infused with environmental ideas, actions, and spiritual ceremonies. There would be at least one children's religious education curriculum taught each year on the environment. The adults in the church would carry on a Simplicity Circle to help each other take actions in their lives that minimize their footprints on the planet. There would be field trips to sites of environmental concern and to places of great natural beauty. Community meals would emphasize locally grown sustainable foods, free of biocides, with nothing wasted.

Worship would normally invoke elements of the earth and our human connectedness to it. There would be environmental prayers, music, altar objects, and readings. There would be services outdoors. On a regular basis, the minister and congregational leaders would focus sermons on the community of life and the challenges faced by this ecological community.

Imagine the building such a church would own. Its location would be accessible by human-powered and public transportation and would enhance rather than detract from wildlife habitat. It would capitalize on solar, wind and water energy to the fullest extent possible. The building would be built with native materials as much as possible, be well-insulated, lighted with natural light, cooled by natural breezes and heated by the sun. Appliances would be energy-efficient at every turn.

Imagine the grounds of such a church. Recognizing the importance of living well in one's particular place, the plant community would reflect native and well-adapted species for the eco-zone of the church. Water levels applied to landscaping would be relatively consistent with those occurring naturally. Chemicals would be avoided, shading for the building would become

important and vegetables would be grown for the community with compost produced through community meal preparation.

In such a church, the administration would be mindful of conservation in all its policies. Such policies would include recycled paper products, reusable dishes, cloth diapers, and the use of non-toxic cleaners, soaps, and art supplies. Church programs would include mending bees, swap programs, work parties, and recycling of paper, glass, metal and plastic products used by the church and its members. Church investments would emphasize socially and environmentally responsible funds.

Finally, such a church would embrace an external leadership role in highlighting environmental responsibility in the larger community, especially in relation to issues of eco-justice. The church would recognize that poor people and people of color are the first victims of environmental poisons and natural disasters, that the problems of the ecosystem cannot be solved without facing the problems of inequality. The church would undertake "projects", perhaps on an annual cycle -- Impeding irresponsible industry or governmental action, developing appropriate land use planning, protecting critical habitats, cleaning up the environmental atrocities of the past, distributing environmental degradation equitably, reducing unneeded consumption. The church would participate in teaching the community that it exists not only in space but also in time – extending backward through memory and tradition, and forward – seven generations – through vision and legacy.

Such a church program exists!

Does this vision of a truly "green" church sound too idealistic to ever exist? Many of our Unitarian Universalist churches actually do engage in some of the actions I have described. Others sound almost beyond our grasp. The UU Seventh Principle Project believes that this vision of eco-spirituality is implicit in living the seventh of our UU principles – respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. For too long UUs have paid lip service to this ideal, or attempted to implement piecemeal actions that gesture toward environmental responsibility. There is a need for a roadmap toward a new church lifestyle, a

coordinated program of environmental stewardship that all UU's can buy into. Green Sanctuary is designed to be such a program.

Fortunately, the UUA already has a successful program to serve as a model: The Welcoming Congregation. This program invites congregations to educate themselves about homophobia and take specific steps to welcome people of all sexual orientations. As of 1999, nearly one in five UU congregations had earned formal recognition as a Welcoming Congregation, while between 200 and 300 others had begun the process. The Welcoming Congregation Program invites churches to organize a developmental committee, to request candidacy status, and to then engage in a series of simple steps outlined by the program over the course of a candidacy period.

In the fall of 2000, the Seventh Principle Project launched the new Green Sanctuary program, based on the Welcoming Congregation's model, with "Founder's Churches" across the U.S. and Canada. Green Sanctuary asks a church to engage in seventeen actions over a candidacy year, organized into six areas of church life:

1. Energy Conservation and Environmental Practices
2. Reduce, Reuse, Recycle
3. Church Communication
4. Religious Education
5. Worship
6. Environmental Justice

To obtain recognition as a Green Sanctuary, a church must follow through on five steps, outlined on the Program Overview, and submits an application for accreditation at the end of the church year.

A church that undertakes to become a Green Sanctuary examines every area of church life – outreach, social concerns, religious education, buildings and grounds, social events, church communication, and church administration – to see that its activities reflect respect for the

interdependent web. It's walking the talk in a big way, and it gives the church a real sense of following through on its commitments in tangible, outwardly visible ways.

Let me leave you with this: All of the religions of the world have something in their teachings and traditions that encourage people to take care of the environment. Religious and spiritual groups are perfectly placed to encourage people to take actions for and to have faith in the Earth. Religious buildings and religious groups, by persuasive inspiration and examples to members and visitors alike, can serve as centers from which grow green homes, workplaces, schools, social institutions and entire green communities. Unitarian Universalists ought to be in the forefront of this movement, rather than playing catch-up to it!

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