

Preaching Green

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Sustainability

Religious facilities are becoming increasingly more green and sustainable.

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Much has been written about schools, office buildings, medical centers and other facilities adopting greener and more sustainable operating practices.

Less noticed is the extent to which churches, synagogues and mosques around the world have embraced similar environmentally responsible practices.

In some respects, we might expect religious facilities to be at the head of the list as far as facilities jumping on the green/sustainability bandwagon.

This is because the issue is discussed frequently in the *New and Old Testaments* as well as in the *Koran*.

For instance, in the *Old Testament* are the lines, "See to it that you do not pollute or destroy My world, for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it." (Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah on 7:13)

Additionally, the concept of "bal taschit" is discussed in Jewish texts instructing people to become environmentally conscious and avoid being wasteful.

In Deuteronomy (20:19), the scripture prohibits the destruction of trees, specifically fruit trees.

And the *Koran* reminds us to be respectful of the earth because, as one Islamic academic says, "It shows reverence to all that Allah created."

And even though these scriptures are centuries old and have not always been obeyed, it appears some of today's followers are more mindful of them than ever before.

According to a Pew Foundation study released in 2007, mainline Protestants have long supported green and sustainability issues and 54 percent of Evangelicals — and 63 percent of those ages 18 to 29 — not only support green/sustainability issues, but also are willing to pay more to be environmentally responsible if that is necessary.

There are many examples of religious facilities becoming greener and more sustainable.

Two of the most interesting are a Mosque in London and a synagogue near Chicago.

The Sustainable Mosque

The [South Woodford Muslim Community Center](#) in London is an interesting example of a mosque that has become environmentally conscious and sustainable.

The facility is quite old, so implementing major structural changes to make it more sustainable would be quite costly.

Because of limited funds, they have taken such steps as replacing conventional light bulbs with reduced-energy equivalents.

Recycling and reuse programs are in place.

And they are taking action to reduce the amount of water, heating and air-conditioning used to further lessen the building's energy needs.

And something unique is a tree-planting program the mosque has established.

Along with [Tolerance International](#), which works to not only protect the environment, but also to help the needy throughout the world, they have calculated the Mosque's carbon emissions and have established an ongoing tree-planting program in developing countries.

Trees are planted to add oxygen into the air and offset the amount of CO₂ produced by the mosque and its congregants.

Further, the head of the mosque is encouraging and teaching congregants to become more environmentally responsible in their own lives as well.

"We want [our] people to start thinking about being carbon free," says Dr. Mohammed Fahim, head of the center. "We want them to recycle more, use fewer natural resources and become much less wasteful."

The Green Jewish Experience

More than 30 years ago, Rabbi Everett Gendler climbed onto the roof of [Temple Emmanuel](#) in Lowell, Massachusetts, and installed solar panels to fuel the eternal light in the temple's sanctuary.

The event made national news, but many commentators and others interpreted the event as a bit "wacky."

Strange it may have been, but today Rabbi Gendler is known as the "father of Jewish environmentalism." Apparently, he was just ahead of his time.

More recently, a relatively new Synagogue in Evanston, Illinois, has heeded his call to such an

extent that the facility is [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design](#) (LEED) certified and one of the greenest and most sustainable religious facilities in the world.

Some of the ways the [Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation](#) accomplished this include:

- Using reclaimed, remilled and refinished wood for the siding of the building
- Installing windows that reduce the energy needed to heat and cool the facility
- Fitting water-reducing fixtures in all restrooms and kitchens
- Building cabinetry out of rapidly renewing agricultural fiber.

Although times are tight for many religious facilities because of the current economic downturn, we can expect more and more of them to do what they can to become environmentally responsible.

For many, the first step will be transferring to green cleaning products.

In most cases, the costs are negligible, and even if there are additional upfront costs for some green cleaning products such as chemicals, this is often offset because the products are highly concentrated so they last longer and go further.

The greening of religious facilities is an opportunity for building service contractors and janitorial distributors.

Administrators need and want your help in incorporating green cleaning and making their facilities healthier, greener and more sustainable.

Survey

The open-ended survey question: "What do you do personally to take care of God's creation?" had the following top five answers from U.S. evangelical leaders:

1. Recycle
2. Reduce use of energy for transportation
3. Encourage others to take care of the environment
4. Pick up after others
5. Conserve water and electricity.

Source: The Evangelical Leaders Survey is a monthly poll of the board of directors of the [National Association of Evangelicals](#). They include the CEOs of sixty denominations and representatives of a broad array of evangelical organizations including missions, universities, publishers and churches.

