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Starting the Green Journey

As concerns mount about global warming and other environmental issues, religious congregations across North America and throughout the world are examining their own operating habits and asking what they can do to become more environmentally responsible. This is especially significant because many church facilities trail other types of facilities on the path to becoming Greener and more sustainable. For instance, on a per-capita, per-hour-of-use basis, houses of worship are some of the biggest wasters of electricity and energy.*



To be fair, we must understand that although religious facilities may trail others in going Green, some have made dramatic improvements and even serve as examples of how any type of facility can become more environmentally responsible. Further, religious facilities are often older than other types of buildings, making them inherently harder to operate in a Green manner. These older buildings were constructed at a time when environmental concerns were simply not an issue. The mechanicals installed, such as heating systems, were likely selected based on their durability and longevity, not on how well they conserved energy.

There are also financial concerns surrounding the Greening of religious centers. Churches, which have traditionally been quite budget conscious, have been impacted considerably by the current economic downturn. For instance, installing solar panels or more energy-efficient windows, both of which can be very costly, is not within the budgets of most religious facilities at this time.

However, this does not mean that churches, synagogues, mosques, and other types of religious centers have to postpone going Green. In fact, they may have no choice in the matter. The Green movement has been almost entirely “customer driven.” For houses of worship, this means that people within the congregation increasingly see

Greening as something that is an important factor in their choice of religious center, as well as in their own lives. Religious facilities may risk losing congregation members if they do not begin to transition to Greener practices.

To become more environmentally responsible, houses of worship must consider their priorities based on their own particular situations, circumstances, and finances—and this all starts with the creation of a Green Team.

A Green Team Approach

According to Mark Cuddy, director of sales east for Tornado, a leading manufacturer of professional cleaning equipment, who has helped many facilities go Green, forming a Green Team answers the question administrators and managers first encounter on their Green journey: where do we begin? “Having a team made up of both church administrators and congregation members guides the facility through the entire transition,” he says. “Their dedication to the process is essential because there will likely be hurdles and challenges along the way.”

Once the team is formed, some of the steps they will take in the Greening process include:

- Benchmarking: Evaluating where things currently stand. How efficient are the HVAC systems? Are Green cleaning products in use? Are windows energy efficient? Are recycling programs in place?
- Developing a plan: Deciding which areas of the facility can be Greened first to begin the process. Often facilities take small, easy-to-integrate, and inexpensive steps first and then advance to more involved and expensive ones. For instance, incorporating a Green cleaning program is often one of the easiest Green initiatives that can be undertaken, and it is also relatively cost neutral.
- Getting everyone on board: The Green team must be enthusiastic about the program and meet regularly with administrators and the congregation to discuss their progress and to share their enthusiasm. The team will

need to remind staff, administrators, and congregants that their facility's Green program is necessary to protect the environment and the health of the facility.

- Implementation: Beginning the program per the plan. Some facilities have gone as far as to designate a start date, for instance, "May 1, 2009, our Green Journey begins."
- Acquiring Green products: Although many facilities start small, some tackle the big projects first because they can have the biggest environmental impact and potential savings. For instance, All Saints Episcopal Church in Brookline, MA, recently installed new energy-efficient heating/air-conditioning systems as well as a power-saving boiler and more energy-efficient lighting; they have been rewarded for this substantial investment with an annual savings of nearly \$20,000 per year in utility costs.

The Big Easy ... Step

Although most facilities start small and then move on to larger Green projects, they still want to make changes that will have an obvious impact. One of the most significant, easiest, and least expensive steps toward making a facility more environmentally responsible is implementing a Green cleaning program. Today, many environmentally preferable cleaning products cost about the same as their conventional equivalents. "It is important to select products that have been certified," adds Cuddy. "Certification by an independent, third-party organization** verifies that the product meets performance standards and has a reduced impact on the environment when compared to conventional equivalents."

Cuddy also advises replacing vacuum cleaners and floor machines with Green equivalents as soon as possible. "Vacuum cleaners should be true HEPA machines," says Cuddy. "This means that the entire machine is airtight so that no contaminants escape the housing

of the machine and nearly 100 percent of what is vacuumed is trapped in the HEPA filter.”

Often such vacuum cleaners will bear the Green Label from the Carpet and Rug Institute. This means that they have been tested and proven to protect indoor air quality.

“In recent years, we have learned a lot more about the impact of floor machines on the environment,” says Cuddy. “Some of these machines can use a lot of water and chemical and release dust and impurities into the air as they are used. [End users should] select machines with built-in vacuum systems to trap impurities before they become airborne; they should also consider cylindrical brush floor-care equipment, which uses less water and chemical than conventional equipment.”

Structural Changes

It is possible to gradually make Green and sustainable retrofits to an existing religious facility that will help keep costs under control and produce operational cost savings that can help fund new projects. For instance, high-efficiency heating and air-conditioning systems, as noted above, can immediately produce significant savings, as can the installation of insulation or energy-saving windows.

Other structural items may not result in immediate cost savings but can be very beneficial to the environment and occupant health once installed. Some of these include:

- Carpets made from recycled materials containing low amounts of volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Depending on use, commercial carpets are designed to last from five to ten years. When they are due for replacement, facilities should consider selecting Green carpet options.
- Paint, upholstery, and construction materials that have low VOC levels when compared to conventional equivalents.

- Low- or no-flow toilets and urinals. Toilets and urinals can last for decades; however, older fixtures can use two, three, or more gallons of water per flush. New toilets may use as little as 1.25 gallons per flush; some religious facilities are even installing waterless urinals that use no water whatsoever. These urinals also eliminate costly plumbing problems.

Caretakers of God's Creation

As more and more churches embrace Green and sustainable issues and take their own steps to become more environmentally responsible, they begin to realize that caring for the world God created is not only a timely issue but also part of any religious institution's mission. In fact, several biblical and Koranic passages teach this idea, encouraging believers to be more respectful of our planet.

"This is an opportunity for religious facilities to take a leadership role in something that impacts the life of our entire planet," says Cuddy. "What better place is there for this to be happening than in a church?"

And church groups appear to agree. In January 2007, a coalition of 28 prominent Evangelical church leaders and scientists released an "Urgent Call to Action" statement regarding their concerns about climate change, pollution, and species extinction.

Submitted to then-President George W. Bush along with congressional leaders, the statement urged "fundamental changes in values, lifestyles, and public policies to address worsening [climatic] problems before it is too late." Business as usual, the statement added, "cannot continue one more day."

The statement made headlines because it encouraged religious groups and scientists to work together to find a solution to current and pending environmental problems. "Great scientists are people of imagination...as are people of great faith," said Rev. Richard Czik, vice president for Governmental Affairs of the National Association of Evangelicals. "We...imagine a world in which science and religion work together to reverse the degradation of Creation."

* *Christian Science Monitor*, 1/23/2003.

** In North America, two of the largest certification bodies are GreenSeal® and EcoLogo™.