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Methodists' services to go 'green'

By Peggy Fletcher Stack
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It's been a long-standing tradition at Christ United Methodist Church in Salt Lake City to let lay leaders run the show at least once a year. For the first time ever, this year's Laity Sunday will be dedicated to environmental issues.

The church has joined forces with Utah Clean Energy, a non-profit group working with industry, government and schools to raise awareness about pollution and other environmental issues, to declare Oct. 22 as "Clean Energy Sunday."

More and more such Christian churches are moving questions of protecting the environment from the political to the religious sphere. Several Episcopal churches in Utah have already aired the Al Gore documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth."

Now even some conservative churches are getting involved.

This week PBS television aired a Bill Moyers' documentary, "Is God Green?", which looked at how a serious split among conservative Evangelicals over the environment and global warming could reshape American politics.

Next month brings "The Great Warming," a film that focuses on environmental activism among Evangelicals as well as ecologists, physicists, emergency room doctors and organic farmers. Narrated by Keanu Reeves and Alanis Morissette, the film showcases the activism of the Rev. Richard Cizik, vice-president of the prestigious National Association of Evangelicals, who sees environmentalism as "creation care."

"Pastors should begin by teaching the word of God," Cizik said in an interview on the film's website. "This is God's world. When we destroy or deplete it, we violate his will."

On Friday night, Utah's Society of Friends (Quakers) was scheduled to hear environmental activists Ruah Swennerfelt and Louis Cox talk about the work of halting poverty and environmental degradation. Swennerfelt and Cox of Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW) put their beliefs into practice in their off-grid solar-powered home in rural Vermont. There they grow most of their own food and model lifestyles that are ecologically sustainable, according to a press release.

For its part, Christ United Methodist will devote all three worship services for some 700 families to sermons on the environment. In three short sermons, UCE Director Sarah Wright will describe the crisis in energy overuse and how it can become an opportunity, David Hoepfner, a University of Utah professor of mechanical engineering, will examine how environmental awareness is a Christian responsibility, and Environmental Engineer Wendy Grosvenor will lay out specifics on how to get involved.

Hymns, scripture readings and special music will emphasize God's creation and mankind's responsibility in caring for it, according to George Everett, a longtime member of the church.

The day's programs were organized by the church's Environment Committee, a group formed early in 2006 to get members involved in these timely issues, Everett explained. The committee decided to begin with energy because "the smoggy atmosphere in the Salt Lake Valley made energy an obvious starting point."

The church already had a well-established recycling program under the direction of Jim Elmslie, who serves as the link between the new group and the parent committee.

It took action to become "a green church" several years ago, Everett said, "but the devotion of all three Sunday morning services to environmental issues is a first."

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