

Working Together to Clean Up the Planet

MARIANNE PETERS

As an individual, my efforts to recycle and conserve might be admirable, but let's face it, if it were just up to me, I couldn't keep pace! It's better when whole communities take steps to live sustainably.

Churches can play a huge role in environmental stewardship, and more and more they are doing just that. Churches everywhere are forming teams who help their congregations reduce waste, conserve resources, and spread the word about recycling.

One such church is First Covenant Church in Omaha, Nebraska.

People at the church were already interested in sustainability when J. Matthew Sleeth, author of the book *Serve God, Save the Planet: A Christian Call to Action*, spoke at the Sunday morning service in August 2008. Sleeth, a physician, and his family came to the realization that their conspicuous consumption contradicted their Christian values. They downsized their lifestyle, cutting back on their fossil fuel and electricity consumption by two-thirds. Sleeth now travels throughout the United States inspiring other Christians to follow his lead.

"Many of us were inspired by what J. Matthew Sleeth had to say," says Diane Stoner, one of the charter members of First Covenant's creation care team (no connection with this column!). Armed with new ideas, a small group of kindred spirits decided to get organized. Stoner explains, "Involv-

ing people who are passionate about caring for creation is important. Their enthusiasm will help build excitement in others as ideas are implemented."

Erin VanPutten, another charter member, explains their purpose. "By forming a creation care team, we were simply responding to the latest information about our environment," she says. "We are much more aware of our overall impact, and we wanted to make a change.... By implementing a recycling program, among other changes, we can show people that it's easy to make a difference."

Ideas flowed at their group's initial meeting in October 2008. Their first task: reduce the use of Styrofoam cups at fellowship hour. They decided to have a mug-raiser, asking the congregation to bring in any unused coffee mugs they had at home. The response was so overwhelming that they ended up with more mugs than they could use and had to give some away.

"People love their coffee," says VanPutten, "so having a mug-raiser was the best way for our church to cut back on the cups."

"We now have an eclectic assortment of mugs, which have been great conversations starters for Sunday fellowship hour," Stoner says. "We've stopped using paper and Styrofoam products for our church dinners." The team has also placed recycling containers in high traffic areas so that people are encouraged to participate.

But they're not stopping there. Since Sleeth's visit last year, they have continued to "green" their church. "Additional things we have discussed are starting a Bible study on creation care, reducing even more Styrofoam use, adopting a local park, possibly starting a toy library, and selling reusable grocery bags," says Stoner.

When the group started their efforts, some members at First Covenant were skeptical. "Anytime you implement a change, you run the risk of some resistance," Stoner admits. "I would say, however, that our congregation understands the importance of creation care and has been very supportive. Going green is not always the easiest or least expensive path to take, but as Christians we know it's the right thing."

Interested in starting a green group at your church? Contact Diane Stoner at diane@firstcovenantomaha.org or at (402) 391-2747. Also, check out the Community Environmental Council of Santa Barbara's (California) website—www.cecsb.org—which has an excellent guide for congregations, including specific steps to take.

And follow First Covenant's example. "Keep in mind that the earth is on loan to us from God and he has entrusted us to care for it," advises Stoner. "Dream big and take the necessary small steps to make those dreams happen." ■

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