

## **Green mission**

*Churches under renovation using methods that are environmentally friendly*

By Erica Noonan

Globe Staff / December 7, 2008



The Unitarian Universalist church in Concord once attended by early environmentalists Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson will soon be reopening its newly "green" doors. Work is coming to an end of a \$1 million, two-year-long renovation that will make First Parish far more handicapped-accessible and boast a host of environmentally friendly changes that will save the planet's resources, and the congregation's money. The church is hoping to save as much as \$10,000 of its annual \$34,000 energy bill

"People were really eager to do a green project, but from an environmental and a faith-based perspective," said Peter Nobile, cochair of the church's Green Sanctuary Committee.

Churches and temples across the northwestern suburbs of Boston are taking a greenness-is-next-to-godliness approach to their sanctuaries, emphasizing environmentally friendly construction that ranges from low-flush toilets, recycled flooring, native plants, low-emissivity windows, and, at one synagogue, even solar power for religious lighting.

It's a change in outlook for many religious leaders, who traditionally have been less than comfortable with the technical and financial nitty-gritty of making buildings more efficient.

"If you aren't paying attention to your heating and cooling, you are wasting money hand over fist," said Thomas Nutt-Powell, president of Brookline-based Massachusetts Interfaith Power & Light, which has consulted on dozens of regional church renovations.

"That's money you can't use for another program, which is the reason the church, synagogue, or mosque exists to serve the Kingdom of God, not the kingdom of Wall Street or Mobil or Exxon."

At South Church in Andover, several green elements were included in an approximately 6,000-square-foot addition the church constructed in 2005 and 2006, said Betsy Davis, chairwoman of the church's board of trustees. The new work includes a heating and cooling system and air and vapor barriers that meet or exceed energy efficiency codes. Most of the new lighting is fluorescent and relies on motion sensors that automatically turn off the lights when no movement is detected, Davis said.

"There's a very fervent belief by much of our membership that we need to be stewards of the environment and lead by example," she said. "Cost savings is a very nice benefit, but it's not the motivating factor."

The church has also made improvements to the original 120-year-old structure and an addition constructed in the 1950s, including changing to fluorescent light bulbs in a few locations and upgrading the building management system that controls the heating and cooling systems and other functions. "It is about as slick as an older system can be, as far as what it does control," Davis said.

Nutt-Powell, who consults with churches around the state looking to renovate and become more environmentally aware, said much of his job is to help people overcome their fear of change. His consultations are "20 percent about the boiler systems, 80 percent about how they are going to transform their congregations," said Nutt-Powell, who has advised hundreds of churches since co-founding the nonprofit a decade ago.

If church leaders balk at investing \$15,000 for a new furnace or energy management system, he'll walk them into the church parking lot to survey the collection of Escalades, Lexuses, and minivans, and do a little on-the-spot reality check. "I ask them, 'Did any of these cars cost you less than \$15,000? Will they not only pay for themselves, but last you for the next 20 years?' " he said.

The Rev. Larry Peacock, who directs the Rolling Ridge Retreat & Conference Center in North Andover, said staff at the United Methodist Conference of New England's main retreat center had already installed compact fluorescent bulbs and low-flow shower heads and toilets. The center is now gearing up for major - and costly - modifications to its gorgeous, but energy-inefficient, Georgian-style main house and other buildings. The biggest item on the list of capital improvements - which could total almost \$2 million - would be a shift in its heating system from oil to gas that could reduce by 50 to 75 percent the center's \$300,000 annual heating bill, Peacock said.

Rolling Ridge is also considering the needs of its entire 38 acres of open space. Peacock said the church's work must include "being a good steward of all of it." "We're interested in saving money - that's part of it - but we are also looking at things that have no immediate cost savings, but are good for the earth," he said.

The green church movement has been a long time coming, but is now being embraced by a wide variety of religious groups, said John Buehrens, former president of the national Unitarian Universalist Association. "For too long America had relatively bad environmental theology, with the idea 'Jesus is coming and we don't really need to care of the environment.' We see this going back to the Puritans, that God has specially blessed their errands into the wilderness and they could treat the native population however they wanted," he said. For decades, talk of green churches, in-house recycling programs, and special worship services for Earth Day were seen as something just for the most liberal of congregations, he said. But now even the nation's conservative evangelical Christian leaders are promoting "a sea change of consciousness recognizing that the creation we have been given is one we have to treat very carefully," said Buehrens.

Bud Cederholm, bishop suffragan of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts - which is contemplating green church projects in Concord and Andover - said congregants have "come to a deeper understanding of the effects of global warming on the whole planet." "There is a realization that church buildings are a prime place where energy is wasted," said Cederholm. "They're old, inefficient, and small meetings are held in large heated rooms. I think people understand that it's within our abilities to do something, and interest is growing exponentially."

Harvard-based architect Daniel Barton, a frequent adviser to church renovations, said he and his peers have noticed an increase in church interest in innovative irrigation solutions, such as cisterns that capture rain runoff from the roof and store it for landscaping. "Many of the churches really feel a sense of responsibility that, as churches, they need to set an example and be leaders in their community," said Barton. For a community of faith, money is always an issue, but should become more manageable as the technology gets less expensive, he said. "I'm looking forward to the day where it's not newsworthy to see things done in a sustainable way," he said.

Globe correspondent Brian P. Benson contributed to this report. Erica Noonan can be reached at [enoonan@globe.com](mailto:enoonan@globe.com).

[http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2008/12/07/green\\_mission/?page=full](http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2008/12/07/green_mission/?page=full)