

Spiritual Life

RICH BARLOW

For some, green is next to godliness

Amid the standard Christian iconography adorning All Saints Episcopal Church in Brookline — the lush stained glass, the heavy wooden cross suspended above the altar — is a less obvious but very real symbol of the parish's faith: the boiler.

A desk-sized metal box fed by piping that snakes overhead, it's not much to look at, unless you're among "those of us who get seriously excited by pipes and wires," jokes Tom Nutt-Powell, the parishioner who pushed for the new system.

It is, however, a model of efficiency and eco-friendliness, as are other steps the church has taken in recent years, including a decision to buy all of its electricity from a renewable-resources generator.

All Saints is among 24 member churches of Massachusetts Interfaith Power & Light (MIP&L), cofounded by Nutt-Powell earlier this year to promote energy conservation in houses of worship.

According to All Saints, buying nonpolluting electricity will remove the equivalent of more than 100,000 pounds of pollution emissions that contribute to global warming, smog, and acid rain.

Marinating the earth in a toxic broth doesn't fulfill God's Genesis grant to humans of dominion over creation, says the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, priest associate at All Saints. (At an estimated savings of \$17,000 a year, the new energy system also pays for itself over time.)

This kind of green spirituality comes with a high pricetag — another MIP&L member, Grace Episcopal Church in North Attleborough, spent \$300,000 to buy eight new boilers for its 1930 building. Each is responsible for



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heating a separate section. When one section of the building is being used, heat in the unused sections is shut off, unlike the old, buildingwide heater.

The Rev. Maryalice Sullivan, rector at Grace Episcopal and an environmentalist from her childhood days looking at New York's garbage-strewn streets, says that although the new system should cut heating bills at Grace, spiritual motives outweighed financial ones: "We are responsible for this Earth that we live on."

Advocates hope it's not just a passing fad, and point to a slew of environmental initiatives by churches that are drawing media attention.

California churches have formed their counterpart to MIP&L.

Parishioner Tom Nutt-Powell checking an energy-efficient boiler at All Saints Episcopal Church in Brookline. The church has joined about two dozen others in an association promoting the use of renewable-source energy and other conservation measures.

cient uses to which they're put.

"One person will be trying to get out the newsletter and they'll heat up the whole sanctuary," she says.

The green effort has sparked something of a backlash among some who see it giving off its own pollution — a smokescreen concealing a liberal agenda. One conservative believer, responding on an evangelical Web site to the "What Would Jesus Drive" question, argued that the Lord would be partial to Hummers.

At All Saints, Bullitt-Jonas, who was arrested last year during a prayer vigil in Washington protesting the Bush administration's energy plan, says she has been chastised for her outspokenness.

She notes, diplomatically, "I preached with some fervor against drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and at least one person wasn't sure that was a good sermon."

But she reels off passages from scripture indicating the preciousness of creation.

The prophet Hosea lamented the baleful results of Israel's sinfulness: "The land mourns, and everything that dwells in it languishes: the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and even the fish of the sea perish." Psalm 19 begins, "The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims its builder's craft." In the New Testament, Paul wrote to the Colossians about Jesus: "In all things he himself might be preeminent, for in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him . . ."

Expansive passages such as these have prompted Protestant theologians to rethink their old view that Jesus came to save humanity, and instead to consider it his mission to save all of creation, says Bullitt-Jonas. "There's some anxiety that church will become overpoliticized, and I appreciate that. On the other hand, any spirituality that is so cut off from our daily lives . . . is completely irrelevant."

And several religious groups consigned a letter to Detroit's Big Three automakers, imploring them to improve fuel efficiency standards. The gas-conscious churches are running ads with a twist on an evangelical slogan: "What Would Jesus Drive?"

There's a double-pronged spiritual premise behind the efforts. Beyond green concerns, church leaders note research showing that a lot of pollution tends to be spewed in poor neighborhoods. Cleaning it up fulfills the injunction to care for the less fortunate.

MIP&L member churches pay a fee (from \$395 to \$895, depending on a parish's budget) and agree to an energy audit for their buildings to make improvements.

There are always some. "They tend to be very large, very old buildings," says Lara Hoke, outreach coordinator for MIP&L. "They often will have kind of unusual spaces, like a sanctuary," which can hemorrhage heat, especially given the unavoidably ineffi-