

MATTERS OF FAITH

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Believing in green

Houses of worship are going eco-friendly to save money

By Erica Noonan and Brian Benson, Globe Correspondent | October 26, 2008

NEEDHAM - Souls are saved in the sanctuary, but money is saved in the boiler room.

These days, local churches and temples are taking a greenness-is-next-to-godliness approach to their sanctuaries, emphasizing environmentally friendly construction that ranges from low-flush toilets to 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 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."

Wellesley's Temple Beth Elohim hopes to power its Eternal Light, a religious symbol that must remain constantly lit, through solar power. First Parish, a Unitarian Universalist church in Needham, hopes to save thousands of dollars a year in heating costs by installing double-pane windows.

At First Congregational Church in Holliston, officials are preparing to insulate the 100-year-old church sanctuary to keep heat within its soaring ceilings.

Nutt-Powell said Interfaith Power & Light was formed after his home parish, All Saints Episcopal in Brookline, did a six-year-long, \$180,000 renovation and reduced its utility consumption by 40 percent.

Now he consults with churches around the state looking to renovate and become more environmentally aware. 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?'"

Dozens of houses of worship in eastern Massachusetts - including churches and synagogues in Upton, Holliston, Waltham, Wellesley, Wayland, Needham, Lincoln, Newton, and Concord - are in the midst of "green" renovations or planning to embark on one soon.

It's a movement that has been a long time coming, but is now being embraced by a wide variety of religious groups, said John Buehrens, minister of First Parish in Needham. "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, a former president of the national Unitarian Universalist Association.

Bud Cederholm, bishop suffragan of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, 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 - they're old, inefficient, and small meetings are held in large heated rooms," said Cederholm, whose group oversees 193 congregations ministering to 77,000 Massachusetts Episcopalians. "I think people understand that it's within our abilities to do something, and interest is growing exponentially."

Green elements will also figure heavily into plans for St. Gabriel the Archangel Parish's planned new Catholic church in Upton, which has the considerable job of merging two parishes, Holy Angels in Upton and St. Michael's in Mendon, into one new building in 2009. The plans are still in the earliest design stage, but "it's essentially going to be, 'how green can you go and still be cost effective?'" said member Art Bartlett. "We don't know what those figures are yet."

Selling church building committees on energy-efficient heating systems is usually not difficult because of the payback in energy savings over time and the fact that state building codes require efficient systems, said Daniel Barton, an architect based in Harvard who is working on the St. Gabriel building.

As a frequent adviser to church renovations, Barton said he has recently noticed an increase in the number of church committees considering sustainable elements for their projects, such as dual flush toilets, metered faucets, and cisterns that capture rain runoff from the roof and store it for landscaping irrigation. "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. "Hopefully so much of it just becomes standard practice," he said. "I'm looking forward to the day where it's not newsworthy to see things done in a sustainable way."

Environmentalism and sustainability were guiding values for First Parish in Needham, which is nearing the end of a 14-month-long, \$2.2 million renovation, said member Ed Quinlan. First Parish expects to reduce its annual heating costs from close to \$12,000 to less than \$6,000, thanks to energy efficient windows and insulation, and see its annual electric bill plummet from more than \$4,000 to just under \$2,500 when its rooftop solar panels are installed.

The church's carbon footprint will also shrink by more than half, from an estimated 160,000 pounds of carbon dioxide warming the globe to just 70,000 pounds when all the efficiencies are in place, Quinlan said.

In Wellesley, Temple Beth Elohim is set to start a \$30 million green construction project, said Harriet Warshaw, president of the synagogue.

"We're commanded to take care of the earth," said Warshaw. "Being sustainable is a core value within Judaism so we really wanted to have the building reflect that value. Every major decision was always looked at through the lens of sustainability."

Plans include a garden irrigated by rain run-off, as well as a protection plan for nearby wetlands and sustainable carpeting and finishes. Temple leaders explored heating hot water through solar electricity but determined it would not be cost effective, given how little hot water the temple consumes, Warshaw said. But they hope their Eternal Light will be lit through solar power.

Temple Beth Elohim officials also reached an agreement with Wellesley schools in which the temple and Schofield Elementary School will share their parking lots, preventing the need for the church to take away green space for parking, she said.

A few miles away, at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, workers are putting the finishing touches on a \$150,000 project that replaced 51 single-pane windows original to the church's 1948 addition with double-pane windows, said church sexton Steve Killeen.

"The difference is amazing as far as draftiness," Killeen said. Before, "you'd get a cold breeze running through the windows and then have to turn the heat up just to compensate for that." Killeen said the church undertook the project hoping to lower its heating bill, which was approximately \$30,000 last winter. Next year, officials plan to change from steam heat to forced hot air, and install central air conditioning in some parts of the building, Killeen said.

At First Congregational Church in Holliston, officials are preparing to insulate the 100-year-old church sanctuary. With a soaring ceiling and tall columns, the room can grow frigid in winter. This year - with fuel costs a major part of every church budget - the faithful can no longer afford to ignore the pocketbook

"The first priority for the church is "not only greening the church, but trying to control and reduce the energy usage," said Greg Schumacher, a member of the congregation. "Energy costs are increasing dramatically, and it's probably one of the most difficult things for a church to handle."

Matters of Faith is series of occasional articles examining religious life in area communities.

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