

# Faith in going green

## Local religious groups focus on relationship between beliefs and the environment

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When Carol Kuhre worked at Trimble Local School District, 20 minutes outside of Athens, her students' art projects concerned her.

"We'd ask the children at Trimble to make posters and they would color the streams yellow. They honestly believe that that is the color that a stream is supposed to be. They don't understand it's that way because of coal pollution," said Kuhre, coordinator for the Earth Justice Network, a coalition of different faiths that advocates environmental justice.

While many environmental activists are using Earth Day and Earth Week as a time to focus on different aspects of recycling and conservation, Athens religious groups are using the day as a time to focus on the relationship between faith and the environment through sermons and panel discussions.

"There's pretty much a consensus on the importance of honoring our obligation to the environment. In my own faith tradition, we consider the world an interdependent and interconnected web; none of us can live without the support of this working together," said Evan Young, spiritual director for United Campus Ministries and minister of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens.

Many faiths consider environmental justice valuing God's creation, Young said.

"People who cared about the environment were labeled as tree-huggers 30 years ago, but now it's an issue for anyone who's alive. We don't want to poison the place where we live to the point that we can no longer live there," said the Rev. Bill Carol, rector at the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd.

In 2004, 55 percent of faith traditions supported strict environmental regulations, up 3 percent from 2000, according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

In addition to talking about environmental concerns, congregations are working to make their places of worship more sustainable. Both the Episcopal and Unitarian congregations are taking steps to be more energy efficient by weatherizing their buildings — adding insulation to decrease energy use — and investigating solar power.

The Episcopal Church also is raising awareness about the lasting effects of coal mining by giving "coal tours," where participants help clean up abandoned mines, Carol said. The coal mines have caused acidic drainage that seeps as groundwater to streams. It kills aquatic life, makes water undrinkable and turns the water yellow, according to the Appalachian Center for the Economy and

and aquatic life, makes water undrinkable and turns the water yellow, according to the Appalachian Center for the Economy and the Environment. Christianity is not the only faith that places an emphasis on environmental stewardship. The Jewish holiday of Passover began on April 19, and includes Earth Day. Many Jews are focusing on global warming and healing the earth during Passover, according to The Shalom Center, a division of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College based out of Philadelphia. Islamic teachings state that humans were made from the earth and that they have a duty to maintain the earth, said Muhammad Chozin, programming committee chair for the Muslim Student Association.

“Our five calls to prayer during the day follow the rotation of the earth and it reminds us to be in contact with the earth. Even though you must wash before you pray, using too much water is prohibited. You can wash your hands three times maximum because more than that is just waste,” Chozin said. “Zakat” is Arabic for charity and Muslims are obligated to give to charity, similar to the Christian concept of tithing, he said. “The more wealth one has, the more you will consume. For example, if you have a car, you will spend more money and use more resources. You’ll add to global warming. The poor are experiencing the same effects of your wealth, but none of the benefits. That’s why we give,” Chozin said.

The suffering of humans and the environment is directly linked, said Kuhre, coordinator of the Earth Justice Network. “Where there’s toxic waste and pollution, that’s where the poor live. Research is showing that poor countries will be affected sooner and more adversely than richer countries to global climate change because most of the poor live in lower latitudes,” she said.

Continuing with that logic, managing ecosystems is a way to fight poverty, and poverty was one of the leading social concerns of Jesus, Kuhre said. “In Appalachia, we have one of the richest regions of natural resources in the U.S. But people here are very poor, and they shouldn’t be. If they have control of resources, they can manage the ecosystem more effectively,” she said.

Within the many congregations in Athens, concern for the environment is a common theme.

“There are all these different faiths, and I wish we could stop focusing on differences because it seems that all religions are similar on the environment issues,” Chozin said.