

THE GREENING OF
ORINDA COMMUNITY CHURCH
An Open and Affirming Congregation of the United Church of Christ
Where We Are Now
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I. What is a “Green” Church?

As people of faith we can no longer deny that the earth and its inhabitants are in deep trouble, nor can we deny our responsibility to act on that knowledge. According to current scientific evidence, the earth, our home, is in the midst of a growing ecological crisis. This home, the earth’s environment, touches every aspect and sphere of human and non-human existence. We inhabit a completely interconnected and interdependent universe, and as such each of our actions affect everything else. As we begin to comprehend the destructive effects of the collective actions of humanity we are also waking up to our moral responsibilities as Christians living in an interconnected world. The *Good News* is that by acknowledging and conscientiously living our interconnectedness through well-founded and focused action to sustain, protect, and care for creation, we generate positive transformation that redirects our current trajectory. The formation of a “green church” is a way that a community of faith can live into a greater awareness and caring of God’s creation.

Green churches are faith communities that are intentionally choosing to extend their gifts of spiritual nourishment to God’s greater creation. This is an inspired way of approaching our faithful mission of radical welcome and inclusion to enfold within the care of the church the non-human beings of God’s creation. Members of green congregations live with an awareness of the ethical implications of the human “de-creation” of the earth and feel compassion for all people, creatures, and ecosystems as part of the body of God. Green church communities commit to an ongoing witness to the truth

that all issues of social justice are ultimately affected by global ecological crisis. Concern for future generations, for our children, and what kind of world they will inhabit is a compelling reason why many choose to engage in church greening projects.

Congregations engaging in green church practices strongly feel God's presence in nature as a lived experience, inspiring communities of faith into a deeper awareness of God as embodied in the world. We come to realize that we have never been separate from creation and that we are called to a place of awe and wonder at God's creation. We long to reclaim this God-in-nature as the ground of our being and resurrect the long-obscured green roots of our Christian heritage. As people of faith we are invited to be open to the radical idea that God is calling us, as part of the beloved interconnected community, to the hard and holy work of helping to heal the earth for the sake of all life.

II. How Green We (Already) Are

As 2006-2007 Minister-in-Training, it is my designated responsibility to assist Orinda Community Church (OCC) in its ongoing process of becoming a "green church." Many will already be aware of some of the things that have been underway in the church community this year. The pastoral team has a long tradition of speaking out about environmental concerns, such as Frank's recent sermons, "Of God and Glaciers" addressing the theological aspects of global warming, and "If You Must Boast" on the theme of gratitude relative to environmental stewardship. My own sermons this year have included "Old Dominion" on the significance of seeing creation as an interrelated unity rather than something apart from us to be dominated and exploited. Vice President Al

Gore's Academy Award-winning movie, "An Inconvenient Truth," was shown twice with follow-up discussions. Then came the annual Camp Cazadero Retreat which had as its theme, "Clearing Clouded Eyes: Reconnecting Through Seeing," again promoting an understanding of ourselves as an interconnected and interdependent part of nature. Visual displays were created by computer-talented retreat members to help "bring Caz home" to the greater OCC community.

The events mentioned are part of an ongoing effort by the pastoral team and other members of the church to promote an eco-theological ethic and practice at Orinda Community Church. In fact, there have already been many concrete steps taken at OCC to create a "greener" church. These steps have involved real physical changes to decrease the number of chemicals toxins used in maintenance and concerted efforts to decrease waste and use less energy in church operations, as well as promotion of a religious respect for creation and encouragement of a healthy and sustainable institutional lifestyle.

Office Manager Susan Whalen and the office staff have made it a practice to purchase recycled materials for church use. Recycled items include office products, paper for all printing needs, photocopy supplies, envelopes, and even paperclips. Computer printer cartridges are recycled whenever possible. Electronic equipment is turned off or unplugged when not in use. Glass, aluminum, paper and plastic waste are recycled in sorting bins with the aim that nothing goes out in the office trash that is not trash.

Caretakers Josiah and Erica Maskaleris have made great strides in continuing to move forward with the church "greening" project. They both have backgrounds in

environmental studies and are committed to living as “green” as possible and facilitating an environmental ethic at OCC. One of the biggest projects they have undertaken has been ridding all the closets, cupboards and storage areas of items that contain hazardous ingredients. Working with other knowledgeable and scientifically based environmentalists such as Susan Jun Fish, our use of toxic garden products like herbicides, pesticides and nitrogen-based fertilizers on the lawn has been greatly curtailed. OCC is no longer using hazardous cleansers or detergents. Instead, the more natural Bon Ami, the mild degreaser Simple Green, and other environmentally-friendly products are employed for cleaning. Safer traps, baits and natural repellents are used in place of dangerous poisons to control insect and rodent pests. Leftover toxic materials, chemicals, old paints and batteries are taken regularly to the County hazardous waste disposal facility, and the pick-up of old appliances and computer hardware is arranged through approved recyclers. The church’s internal recycling system has been expanded and streamlined with greater congregational education about recycling at the church.

Incandescent light bulbs are being replaced by long-lasting florescent lamps using a quarter of amount of energy. Office and kitchen appliances are purchased on the basis of their energy efficiency. We are using rechargeable batteries for equipment that requires batteries. Use of the noisy and polluting leaf-blower has been minimized by more reliance on brooms and rakes to keep leaves and other debris off the sidewalks, courtyards and parking lots. Similarly, the old gas powered “weed whacker” and yard blower are being supplemented or replaced with electronic models. Whenever possible, leaves and other plant roughage are shredded and recycled as mulching material on the plants around the

church. Composters have been acquired for kitchen and garden waste including organic coffee grounds. Future plans for greening the care of the church grounds includes trading in the gas-powered lawn mower for a cordless rechargeable electric machine and use of an aerator to keep the lawns green.

It is essential to acknowledge the important role that the Building and Grounds Commission has played in creating an increasingly green church at OCC. The entire OCC campus has been steadily moving in a “green direction” through the dedicated efforts of individuals like John Creech, Trudi Garland, Dalton James, Pete Hartdegen, Marjorie Hitzl, Jeanne Milligan, Peggy Moe, Les Simmonds, Rudi and Teeb Thomas, Betty Ann Williams and numerous others. The OCC campus is tended and cared for in a way that models environmental responsibility and respect for creation. Furnaces, lighting and water systems are aggressively maintained to maximize efficiency and minimize waste. The financial resources made available by the church’s 2003-2006 *Let’s Turn Up the Heat!* capital campaign have been utilized as planned to upgrade or replace inefficient heating or cooling equipment in the Sanctuary, Nursery Building, Caretaker’s Cottage, Washington/Mayflower Building, and offices. Insulated roofs and double-pane windows have been installed – or are scheduled for installation – on Fellowship Hall, the Music Room, the Nursery Building, the Washington-Mayflower Building and the Caretaker’s Cottage. Low-flush water-saving thermostats and programmable energy-efficient thermostats and timers have been retrofitted wherever feasible. Holden High School has similarly developed an incandescent light-replacement plan for their entire facility. Goats

have been hired in lieu of gasoline mowers to reduce the tall spring grass on the hillsides surrounding the church, and wood chips are being extensively used for weed control.

Important improvements have also been introduced in the food and beverages served during Fellowship Hour and other church activities. As the result of the hard work of the Children and Youth Commission and the church staff we have heeded the advice of health professionals, nutritionists and concerned parents, and are offering healthier, more natural snacks including organic fruit and cookies and crackers with organic and nutritious ingredients. Rather than providing bottled water, which produces enormous amounts of non-biodegradable plastic, the staff has switched over to drinking filtered water in reusable cups and glasses. We no longer use Styrofoam products because of the harm that chlorofluorocarbons cause to the ozone layer in the atmosphere. Another noticeable change has been the shift to Beneficio Coffee which supplies us with organic, songbird-friendly, shade-grown, fair-traded coffee that also tastes great. Beneficio – owned and operated by United Church of Christ (UCC) members in Sacramento – donates 10% of their proceeds from OCC to United Church of Christ mission work and another 20% to grower village development projects in Central America.

III. Our Green Heritage

You probably didn't know the number of "green heroes" we have – and always have had at OCC – I certainly didn't! Early-day pastor Fred Morrow was a passionate outdoorsman as well as an evocative poet of nature (a mountain in the High Sierra is named for him).

William Penn Mott was superintendent of parks for the city of Oakland, general manager

of the East Bay Regional Park District, director of the California Department of Parks and Recreation, and director of the National Park Service. Lucie and Jim Hupp, local pioneers of the green movement were dedicated advocates and teachers, helping the congregation and community learn about organic gardening, recycling and stewardship of the earth. They planted and tended the memorial Olive Grove at the southwest corner of the Fellowship Hall that now bears their name. Jim Campbell, a retired engineer dedicated his retirement years to designing a better shredder for green waste and the manufacture of green compost – an inspiring example of someone who put his convictions right out there. Bruce Howard was a longtime board member of the Save the Redwoods League (a grove is named for him in Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park). Roger Samuelson served as Director of the University of California Natural Reserve System and is currently a board member of the Save the Redwoods League. Josh Stanley led scout and church wilderness hikes all over the Sierra Nevada and taught skiing and rock climbing to hundreds of young people. Amazing OCC gardeners like Betty Colwell, Mary Jo Durham, Joy Elkinton-Walker, Luise Naylor, Dorothy Peers, Lani Shepp and Rose Van Dyke have for years graced the altar and fellowship tables of the church with the beauty of God’s creation. Dalton James sells electricity back to PG&E every month from the energy he collects from his home alternative energy system (Al Gore, move over!). Dave Starkweather has organized scout “high adventure” excursions to wilderness destinations all over the world, and continues to engage OCC’s own Troop 237 in green projects such as the restoration of Bluebird habitat on the hillside above our upper parking lot. “Evergreen” pastor Frank Baldwin through his passion for the beauty of God’s creation continuously and faithfully

keeps issues of ecology and faith at the forefront of his ministry. I know this list is woefully incomplete in acknowledging all many people of OCC who work hard for sustainability and ecojustice issues; happily, there isn't nearly enough room to list all the things you all do, there are just too many of you!

IV. So What....

All in all, this is an amazing number of changes that have occurred to make Orinda Community Church a greener and more ecologically friendly church. Everything that has been accomplished is a cause for celebration and an opportunity to acknowledge just how much has already been done at the church. Before we become too self-congratulatory we need to take a deep breath and realize the difficult and hard truth that greenhouse gas production, by every scientific indicator available, is predicted to go up – precipitously and particularly in the United States. We are nowhere close to mitigating or adapting to global warming, which is what we must now do as an entire human species if we want our children and grandchildren to have a high quality of life in the future.

It's funny, but every once in awhile a truism gets to be thrown into the dustbin. We've always said and believed that there is nothing we can do about the weather; it turns out we were wrong about that! We can do something about the weather and actually *have* been changing it without realizing it. Now that we know, what do you say that we work together to try to do things differently? If there is a silver lining in the dark cloud of global warming it is that this is a nonpartisan, non-species, non-nationalistic issue. Just like it says this is a *global* issue, and maybe – just maybe – the unity and solidarity

Christians have always been seeking can be found in coming together to address something that challenges all humans to act for the good of the whole of creation.

V. What Next?

There is any number of specific ideas that OCC could explore to expand and deepen our efforts to become a truly green congregation. We could ask all the members of the church to fill out one of those guilt-inducing (but potentially motivating) carbon-use “footprint” surveys. Yet more practical resources could be made available for families and individuals who are moved to work on green lifestyle issues at home. It would be useful to have a thorough energy audit of the church with recommendations to further reduce energy use. We could install double-paned windows throughout as well as an insulated roof on the Sanctuary. Working with agencies such as Interfaith Power and Light we could study and perhaps commit to installing solar panels on the Fellowship Hall roof and elsewhere. This possibility been explored before, but the technology and costs involved have changed and updated information as well as new financial incentives might make such a major enhancement seem more feasible than before.

Other possible community projects would be advocating for walkable neighborhoods throughout Orinda and especially in the “Heart” of Orinda, by means of a foot/bike path network to make biking and walking a serious alternative to transportation by car. A pathway through the woods adjacent to the old library building to serve Orinda Senior Village, The Orinda Preschool (TOPS), Holden High School along with OCC would be an especially significant priority. OCC youth and adults could participate in the annual

clean-up of San Pablo Creek and other local streams sponsored by the Friends of Orinda Creeks. OCC members might also work to support community leaders and volunteers who effectively address environmental issues, including the use of toxic chemicals in parks and school environments, air and water quality, public pathways, responsible land use planning and housing development, public transportation, noise control, and climate change.

There are always opportunities coming up for faith-based education and advocacy, as well as numerous organizational possibilities for engaging in faith-based environmental work. For example, three public events have occurred this spring at Pacific School of Religion alone: “Rainbow Ecology: Green(ing) GLBT Communities of Faith,” “The Sacred Wild” and “Greening Churches.” The inter-congregational “Earth Stewards” group is the eco-theological committee of the Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ, and as a member I have contact information for others interested in joining.

Without exception, resource sites recommend that in order to get started and make continued progress, churches striving to green their congregations need to first establish some sort of green task group. The calling of such an ongoing group to raise up and bring forward ecological issues at OCC is one of the primary objectives of the presentation of this paper.

VI. Guiding the Ongoing Effort: The Green Church Committee

Couching the invitation to join the “Green Church Committee” in the language of “call” is to inquire of ourselves through a process of discernment what it is that God is asking us to do as a part of our Christian ministry for creation. The question of how God is asking each one of us to respond to the current “groaning of creation” – the suffering body of the earth and its creatures – in order to bring forth a New Jerusalem is a serious and compelling question and enters the core of our lives of faith. As Americans, we have created a kind of paradise for ourselves. But it is an exclusive paradise and uses so many of the earth’s resources that only a select number of people can enjoy this bounty; it excludes most of humanity and is edging out nonhuman populations as well. It is neither ethical, nor an authentic model of Christ to engage in a privileged form of *Good News* that advantages only a select few of the human population at the expense of life-sustaining habitat for the rest of God’s creation.

The reality of global eco-crisis and an acknowledgment of the unbalanced relationship between humans and the natural world ask nothing less from Christian faith communities than an ecological reformation. Such a transformative eco-theology will engage humanity in newly emerging ways of re-envisioning Christianity and the role and place of our species in this, our planetary home. As a faith community blessed with immeasurable gifts and resources, the members of Orinda Community Church recognize a mandated responsibility to act as stewards of the earth and engage as co-creators inspired by the Holy Spirit to do God’s work for a transformed and redeemed earth. OCC members seek

to implement, nurture, and live a radical new-old model: a revitalized Christianity of creation, honoring the earth's sacred community of which human life is a part. The formation of a "Green Church Committee" gives this project a community-specific intentionality and focus of direction for the future. As an envisioning group it facilitates the development of any number of programs that could potentially be implemented within the wider congregation and community. The expectation and hope in forming the "Green Church Committee" is that the members of the committee will form an ongoing presence in the church body, guiding, teaching, and inspiring OCC in the effort to become a green church.

Opening ourselves to the infinite possibilities for thinking and behaving on behalf of eco-justice in our world invites a myriad of creative potentialities and hopes. And when we act and create in community, what is created is more than the sum of its parts. Just as community engagement in an ecological reformation infinitely expands the possibilities for actions that will make a difference, so too is the scope of vision inexhaustible in the collective imaginations of members of the body of God. All members of Orinda Community Church are invited to the table to care for and celebrate the wonders of creation.

VII. Guidelines for Ecological Reformation and Green Church

Included here are some encompassing guidelines and inclusive mandates from which OCC might engage in transformation through the leadership of the Green Church Committee. The following suggestions for changing behavior and thoughts deliberately

omit predetermined agendas and are left on specific actions, as members of the congregation will ultimately decide which activities will be pursued. Actions will be undertaken both in community and by individuals as we become increasingly aware and convinced that as interdependent and interrelated parts of the web of creation what we do affects others and the web as a whole. The resources for engaging in greening congregations are vast and exciting in their imaginative scope. Choices of issues to address will be guided ultimately through the participation of the whole congregation in concert with the Holy Spirit as our church discerns and understands God's will in relationship to the creation. The following guidelines were inspired by a similar set of suggested earth-community responsibilities outlined by Dieter Hessel in *Earth Habitat:*

Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response:

- Explore with the congregation information related to global environmental crisis, ethics and theology of eco-justice and patterns of inequity.
- Instill reverence and sacramental respect for all creatures and attentive stewardship of all places through worship, education, and service.
- Engage in grappling with the vocational and moral dilemmas involved with changing to lifestyles that are less consumptive to more sustainable technologies, different life-style patterns and economic models that serve eco-justice models.
- Learn and appreciate the insights and resources of other living faiths in terms of what they might bring to the spiritual quest and vocational dilemmas of these challenging times.

- Explore the implications for daily work, community life, and public engagement related to the issues of political and personal responsibility that come with environmental challenge.
- Look for constructive local responses to worldwide problems such as poverty, food insecurity, and climate change through international and ecumenical connections.
- Promote and encourage the use of renewable and sustainable technologies both nationally and internationally through education and political action. Apply these technologies whenever possible individually and collectively.
- Participate in community organizations that care for place and act on behalf of environmental justice and address social policy and practice that serve the goals of ecology and equity and advocate for change.
- Focus on building sustainable communities, collaborating with others to create and envision lifestyles of reverential, sustainable development in which the concept of “enough” is embraced and practiced collectively and individually.
- Live and express individual and institutional lifestyles consistent with a creation-justice- peace spirituality. Spirituality, worship, and spiritual practice are potent means of rediscovering our integral relationship with the natural world and reconnecting with creation as the body of God.

