

Grace Episcopal Church: Keeping the Green Faith

In 2013, after two years of hard work, Grace Episcopal Church in Morganton, North Carolina became certified as a Green Sanctuary. Not only was it the first church in the state to do so, it was among only 17 other churches in the country certified at that time.

How did they do it?

The Green Team, which carries out the church's environmental projects, is a lay-led initiative. "We had a ministry fair in the fall that got people involved," Rev. Marshall Jolly says. "It started with different light bulbs and a clipboard to get people to talk more about the issues, and it went from there."

"We totally changed out the church in terms of how we do lighting, got the vestry to purchase Energy Star appliances and equipment, and began using botanical-based [cleaning] products in the church and parish hall."

What is Grace doing now?

Taking its efforts a step further, the church has taken on a sustainable landscaping project, installing plants native to North Carolina, so they don't require extra watering. "We use a rain barrel to collect water, too," Rev. Jolly says.

Other projects include an annual appliance drive and "wanted posters" about paper waste. Its campus is also styrofoam-free and uses either china or plant-based biodegradable plates and utensils. "Our pancake supper to-go boxes are made from potatoes."

Grace also shows advocacy, film screenings, and contacts "legislators to offer support — or constructive criticism when circumstances dictate."

Beginning to permeate the culture

Rev. Jolly says that an environmental outlook on daily life, both at the church and at home, is just beginning to permeate Grace's culture. "The Green Team has done a wonderful job," he says. "It has taken on leadership in teaching."

Every year, Grace observes Earth Day on the Sunday that follows it. "We worship outdoors that day when possible. We're keenly aware of our responsibility to continue the teaching ministry."

To increase awareness, the Green Team organizes parish hikes. "We live in the Appalachian foothills and part of our county is in Pisgah National Forest," Rev. Jolly says. "We take hikes and have a family-friendly adventure. We receive the Eucharist somewhere on the hike."

Start small

“As with anything in the church, start small,” Rev. Jolly says. “You don’t have to begin with a total overhaul of your HVAC system. Instead, spend a couple of hundred bucks on replacing light bulbs (with a more environmentally friendly alternative) and see where that takes you.”

He says that the Green Team is the impetus behind Grace’s dedication to environmentalism. “They’re a small but dedicated group of folks — six to eight people who do wonderful work.”