

Green Corner: Conscious Actions, Environmental Choices at the Good Shepherd

Set a good example and encourage people to think about what they are doing. That is how Sue Hands-Renwick, the Parish Administrator at the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd in Greer, SC, inspires parishioners to make good choices for the environment.

Working with church leaders

Sue works with the vestry to make decisions – both small and large – that have a positive impact on the environment, like switching from paper and plastic products to reusable place settings and silverware, for example. They also now ask that parishioners recycle their bulletins at the end of services. “We print the prayer list on a separate piece of paper, so they can take that home,” she says.

“We have a parish house that was built in the 1950s – with 50s-standard building codes,” Sue says. When they renovated the building, they took the opportunity to make it a greener place. “We had insulation put in all the walls and had especially bad areas where the wood had warped wrapped in Tyvek.” They also lowered the ceiling. “That improved acoustics and provided an air barrier between the ceiling and the attic,” she says. Now they are raising money to insulate the attic.

Sue says the vestry has been instrumental in making decisions that are good for the environment. “They decided to get rid of the tank water heater and put in an on-demand water heater instead,” she says. Though the on-demand heater was more expensive initially, “it will save money in the long run.” The vestry also made decisions about installing low-flow toilets and new faucets. “And they are active in making sure people recycle.”

Start small and emphasize money-saving

“There are little things that we can do to help the environment, so the idea doesn’t seem so insurmountable,” Sue says. For example, she now collects and uses coffee grounds in the rose garden. “It improves the soil and cuts down on chemical use,” she says.

“It is all the little things,” she says. They plan to buy vinyl tablecloths that can be re-used. They exchanged old lightbulbs for LEDs. They monitor their utility bills to both save money and use less energy.

Sue says that because they are a small parish – around 100 families – they need to “count (their) pennies.” So, framing an environmental initiative as a money-saving strategy helps the parish at large get on board with the idea. “We appeal to the bottom line because we are all struggling for money just to do maintenance, let alone projects, at the church.”

For anyone who is interested in making their church community a greener place, Sue says it is important to celebrate small wins. “It is doable,” she says. “Miracles come in all sizes. Give occasional reminders to the parish about their role as stewards of the earth, and most people will help.”