

Green Corner: A Little Bit Adds Up to a Lot

St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Birmingham, Alabama, has 55 members who live in more than 23 zip codes. But under the leadership of part-time rector, The Rev. Jayne Collins Pool, here's one thing they have in common: being good stewards of the earth.

Before she started working at St. Mark's, Jayne was on the diocesan task force for the stewardship of creation. "I came into this call thinking there are ways that we can be more conscious of what we do."

Pitch in where you can

Jayne says that the church hosts a lunch on the first Sunday of each month. Rather than continuously using and throwing away paper or plastic tablecloths, she plans to purchase cloth tablecloths that she will launder at home between uses.

That is how most eco-conscious parishioners reduce St. Mark's carbon footprint: they pitch in and use their own resources. Different parishioners split up paper, cans, and bottles used at the church and take their share home to recycle. One parishioner, who is a master gardener, takes home leftover soft drinks to feed her compost pile, and she recycles the containers.

"We have a fish fry during one of our outdoor services," Jayne says. The senior warden volunteers to take the used oil from the fryer to a recycling center.

There is also a volunteer who changes the HVAC filter once a month to increase the longevity of the system and burn less fuel.

Saving money is a part of saving the earth

Like most small churches, St. Mark's does what it can to save money – and saving money and saving the environment often go hand in hand.

For example, Jayne used to give the leftovers from the monthly lunches to elderly parishioners in Ziploc bags. Now, she saves number 3 plastic containers (which are not accepted by their curbside recycling program) and uses those to pack up the leftovers.

They also use altar flowers that come from parishioners' gardens. "We try to make them last as long as we can," she says. They refrigerate the flowers in water-filled buckets between services.

Jayne also works from home when she can to conserve the church's resources. "During those times when no one is at the church, we can keep the heating and cooling system at a temperature that is safe – but not necessarily comfortable."

It all adds up

St. Mark's can act as a model for churches that may not have the resources or support to make radical changes in the name of environmentalism. "Those little things that our parishioners do make a big difference all together," Jayne says.