ECOFaith: Creating an Environmental Sustainability Program for Religious Communities

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Background & Project Objectives

ECOFaith was founded in 2008 by a diverse group of religious leaders in the Santa Barbara area as a way to bridge the gap between traditional spiritual teachings and modern environmentalism. Their mission was to:

1. Work towards energy efficiency and conservation in places of religious faith;
2. Educate and encourage members of their congregations to adopt environmentally sustainable lifestyles as a dimension of spiritual practice;
3. Partner with a broader community to create a healthy environment.

To accomplish these goals, ECOFaith conducted pilot projects with four different faith communities in the Santa Barbara area. We began our project by evaluating ECOFaith’s efforts through interviews with pilot project leaders and a quantitative assessment of their program results and effectiveness.

Based on our analysis, we determined that developing an enhanced sustainability program could address many of our client’s needs. This program, which we call The ECOFaith Path of Sustainability, would fulfill the following objectives:

1. To improve data collection and measurement of progress, the program structure should encompass a robust record-keeping framework.
2. To unite the worship building and education goals, efficiency retrofits and conservation measures should be linked with congregation education.
3. To make the most efficient use of ECOFaith’s energy and resources, our tools should help participants prioritise the most cost-effective, high-impact, and relevant solutions.
4. To overcome limitations in funding, time and resources, our tools should help participants prioritize the most cost-effective, high-impact, and relevant solutions.

The modern environmental movement has endorsed a profound shift towards science, technology, and policy to solve important problems. Yet, environmentalists are increasingly aware that our current climate crisis will require more than just solutions based in hard science - these efforts must be accompanied by a widespread and deep-rooted change in individual norms and behavior.

Religious communities are well positioned to shape environmental values due to their influence on personal moral development. With over 80% of Americans self-identifying as religious, and with more than 10,000 congregations in California, the potential for faith communities to guide environmental action is substantial.

Do-It-Yourself Energy Audit

We assembled a step-by-step energy audit procedure that addresses major areas of energy consumption in a worship building. The audit is split into sections designed by building system and consists of a two-part process: the building walk-through and post-walk-through energy analysis tool that includes resources for how to implement each recommended action. Our tool is user-friendly, regionally-relevant, high-impact, and time- and cost-efficient.

Educational Resources

We compiled a list of educational action items that were designed to inform participants both of a specific environmental problem and of steps an individual could take to address the issue. The overall list includes three categories of actions: hands-on activities, ideas for demonstration and discussion groups, and templates for passive signs or visual displays. Among the six required education items, congregations must complete at least one action from each of the three categories. Examples of the hands-on action items include: renting a Kill-a-Watt meter and demonstrating its usage, and hosting a bike-to-work day.

ECOFaith Path of Sustainability

A faith community embarking upon the ECOFaith Path of Sustainability would:

1. Form Green Team
2. Develop & Implement Action Plan
3. Display & Track Progress
4. Organize Congregation Leadership

Recommendations for ECOFaith

- Initiate new pilot projects to test and refine the Path of Sustainability
- Focus on maintaining communication and momentum
- Explore additional ways of measuring impacts of behavior change
- Increase emphasis on reducing indirect greenhouse gas emissions
- Expand toolkit availability by broadening web presence
- Revisit organizational mission with new experience and tools in mind

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