

A GREEN SANCTUARY
By David Herndon

17 September 2006
First Unitarian Church
Pittsburgh, PA

When I was in college, most of my friends were geology students. Each spring, after commencement, toward the end of May and the beginning of June, the geology students had the good fortune to travel to some fascinating part of the United States for a two-week field trip. I managed to wrangle an invitation to join them on three of these annual expeditions. The first year we visited the Grand Canyon and Southern Utah. The second year we visited the Everglades and the Florida Keys. The third year we visited New England and then crossed the border into Canada and traveled to Cape Breton at the northern end of Nova Scotia.

The trip to the Grand Canyon and Southern Utah made the deepest impression on me, for the trip included a four-day, three-night raft trip on the Colorado River along the bottom of the Grand Canyon as well as visits to several national parks, including Mesa Verde, Zion, Canyonlands, Bryce Canyon, Arches, and Capitol Reef. I was struck by the beauty of these wild places and horrified by the prospect of the destruction of other wild places by human development. After the trip, I read a number of classic books about wilderness preservation by writers such as Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, and Colin Fletcher.

One of the more memorable books I read at this time was The Monkey Wrench Gang by Edward Abbey, a fictional account of several odd characters who joined forces to do what they could to stop the destruction of monumentally beautiful wild places in the American Southwest. They engaged in acts of sabotage such as burning billboards in the dead of night or mischievously making bulldozers inoperable by pouring sugar in their gas tanks. At the end of the book, if I remember correctly, the members of the Monkey Wrench Gang turned their attention to the Glen Canyon Dam at the northern end of the Grand Canyon, attempting one last spectacularly grand act of sabotage on behalf of the earth.

Influenced by this work of fiction, as graduation from college loomed nearer I briefly considered a career as an environmental saboteur. The job description sounded great: (1) work with interesting people passionately committed to wilderness preservation, (2) travel to beautiful wild places, and (3) blow things up that should not have been built there in the first place. What could be more rewarding? But, alas, the year I graduated from college there was not a single recruiter for environmental saboteurs anywhere on campus!

Nevertheless, although I chose a different career path, I have retained a deep appreciation for wilderness preservation, for environmental stewardship, and for protecting the earth from human carelessness and shortsightedness. Thus, I am very pleased with the surge of interest that has surfaced in recent months here at First Unitarian Church with regard to the Green Sanctuary program. The Green Sanctuary Committee, ably chaired by Ray Schinhofen, will have much to share with this religious community in the near future. This morning, however, I would like to explain how the Green Sanctuary program works and perhaps briefly suggest some reasons why it is important for Unitarian Universalists to be engaged in Green Sanctuary work.

The Green Sanctuary program is sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth, organized in 1999 as an Independent Affiliate of the Unitarian Universalist Association. (The Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth was formerly known as the Seventh Principle Project.) The Green Sanctuary program provides accreditation and recognition for churches that have demonstrated a serious commitment to adopt more environmentally sustainable practices. The Green Sanctuary program includes six steps.

The first step is to organize a Green Sanctuary Committee. I am happy to say that we have already accomplished this step. In August, the Board of Trustees chartered our Green Sanctuary Committee. The charter states: “The Mission of the Green Sanctuary Committee is to help incorporate sound environmental practices into our congregation.” Their goals are: “To seek accreditation as a Green Sanctuary. To build an awareness of the connection between environmental consciousness and spiritual practices. To build an awareness of environmental issues that involve social justice as well as protection of our planet. To generate a commitment for personal lifestyle changes on the part of members and friends.”

The second step is to conduct an environmental audit.¹ The Green Sanctuary Committee will look at both our practices and our building, asking questions like these: What are our energy use patterns and current conservation practices? What are existing policies for use of non-disposable materials and environmentally-friendly cleaning supplies? What existing church policies govern purchasing and investing decisions? Are our investments in keeping with our environmental values? Do we have landscaping policies that direct use of native species and gardening chemicals? What current religious education programs relate to the environment for both children and adults? How well does our worship integrate wisdom of the Earth? Our environmental audit will serve not as a critique but rather as a baseline so that we can measure our progress.

The third step is to design an action plan to guide us as we make positive changes toward more environmentally sustainable programs and policies. Our action plan will need to cover four different categories: (1) Worship and Celebration; (2) Religious Education; (3) Environmental Justice; and (4) Sustainable Living. Sustainable Living is the largest of these four different categories, encompassing ten different subcategories: Simple Living; Energy; Green Purchasing, Investing, and Boycotting; Food Production and Consumption; Landscaping and Gardening; Architecture and Renovation; Reusables; Recycling; Toxic Chemicals; and Transportation. I will return to our action plan in a moment.

¹ Green Sanctuary Manual (third edition), p. 11.

The fourth step is to apply for Green Sanctuary candidacy. We fill out a form and send it to the Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth.

The fifth step is to implement our action plan. This will probably take a year or more.

The sixth and final step is to apply for Green Sanctuary accreditation. We fill out another form detailing the implementation of our action plan and send it to the Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth. Five Unitarian Universalist churches were accredited as Green Sanctuaries in 2002. Another forty-five have been accredited since 2002. Only one thousand congregations remain to be accredited!

One may scoff at the incentive of receiving a merit badge for doing something we presumably think we should be doing anyway. But the Green Sanctuary program provides structure and direction, both of which can be important for helping churches do things they think they should be doing anyway. Moreover, the Green Sanctuary program can push open our understanding, urging us to enlarge our awareness or make lifestyle changes in ways that we might otherwise avoid or resist. We can see how this works by going back and reviewing the third step, which is to develop an action plan for our congregation. A moment ago, I mentioned that our action plan will cover four different categories: (1) Worship and Celebration; (2) Religious Education; (3) Environmental Justice; and (4) Sustainable Living. With regard to Worship and Celebration, singer and songwriter Jim Scott writes: “In these challenging times, it is especially important to consider our spiritual connection with nature and how that relationship nurtures and sustains us as we seek to heal the brokenness in the world.”² The Green Sanctuary program book provides many suggestions for how our church can follow Jim Scott’s advice and find ways to consider our spiritual connection with nature in our worship services. Likewise, the Green Sanctuary program book includes suggestions for religious education opportunities for both children and adults. With regard to Environmental Justice, the Green Sanctuary program book says: “Perhaps the most deeply integrated and compassionate expression of our caring for the planet is our recognition of the plight of beings who are not flourishing.”³ The program book continues: “Because the issue of environmental justice is so deeply embedded in our social, political, and economic structures, it is the most difficult area to see any real impact from our individual and small community actions. Therefore, the Green Sanctuary program asks you to design and implement at least one activity, project, or program that reaches out beyond your own community to address an issue of justice in the wider community or the world.”⁴

For those of us wondering what environmental justice means, consider these examples from the Green Sanctuary program book: “Recycling is an environmental issue. But when an African-American develops lung cancer from breathing fumes emitted from an incinerator in her neighborhood that burns recyclable trash, that is a justice issue. The greenhouse effect is an environmental issue. But when a Pacific islander discovers that the rising sea level resulting from profligate energy use in the developed world will obliterate her low-lying nation within decades, that is a justice

² Ibid., p. 27.

³ Ibid., p. 39.

⁴ Ibid.

issue. Organic food is an environmental issue. But when a Guatemalan banana worker becomes sterile from pesticide exposure, that is a justice issue.”⁵

The fourth major category in our action plan is Sustainable Living. This category has ten subcategories: Simple Living; Energy; Green Purchasing, Investing, and Boycotting; Food Production and Consumption; Landscaping and Gardening; Architecture and Renovation; Reusables; Recycling; Toxic Chemicals; and Transportation. You can see that the Green Sanctuary program is quite comprehensive! For this part of our action plan we may be asking ourselves some tough questions: How can we encourage and support one another to live more simply by consuming less and foregoing non-essential items? How can we use less energy? Do we want to encourage one another to practice more environmentally sustainable choices with regard to food, including eating less meat? How can we implement more environmentally sustainable practices on our church grounds, including avoiding pesticides and herbicides? How could our building become more energy-efficient? If we replace our classroom building with a larger structure, do we want to incorporate green elements into the design? Do we want to adopt a policy discouraging the use of disposable plates and utensils for church meals even though that may mean that we spend more time cleaning up together? Do we want to use recycled paper? Do we want to adopt a policy discouraging the use of toxic chemicals in everything from cleaning products to art supplies? How can we encourage more energy-efficient transportation to and from church gatherings? Our Green Sanctuary Committee will be helping us consider all these questions and many more as well.

One alternative to the Green Sanctuary program is, of course, to become environmental saboteurs, working with interesting people passionately committed to wilderness preservation, traveling to beautiful wild places, and blowing things up that should not have been built there in the first place. But in its own way the Green Sanctuary program is just as radical and revolutionary. By way of illustration, I would like to close with two quotations from the Green Sanctuary program book that I have found especially helpful and motivating. The first radical and revolutionary quotation is from a book entitled Natural Capitalism by Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins, and L. Hunter Lovins.

“We have lived by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. We have been wrong. We must change our lives, so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and to learn what is good for it. We must learn to cooperate in its processes, and to yield to its limits. But even more important, we must learn to acknowledge that creation is full of mystery; we will never clearly understand it. We must abandon arrogance and stand in awe. We must recover the sense of the majesty of the creation, and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it.”⁶

⁵ Ibid., pp. C-2—C-3.

⁶ Ibid., pp. B-11—B-12.

The second radical and revolutionary quotation is from Unitarian Universalist minister Fred Small, who is also a very talented musician and songwriter. Back in 1999, he spoke these vivid thoughts:

“Last year the motion picture Titanic shattered box office records. The story of a life awakening, a life ending, and a love transcending death, all set against a spectacular shipwreck, brought startled tears to the eyes of hardened cynics. But for me the tears started before the fateful romance of Jack and Rose had even begun. Titanic bolted from Southampton for the open ocean, the soundtrack swelled with French horns and digitally sampled sopranos, and as the great ship sliced the surface dolphins sported off the bow, leaping and diving as if welcoming a huge cousin to their world.

“And I cried. I cried because I knew the ship and most of those aboard were doomed, but more for the beauty and innocence of the dolphins and the generous naivety of their welcome. I saw the ship, this crown of technology in the bright morning of the twentieth century, as a metaphor for our hubris, our conceit that we are clever enough and strong enough to conquer nature, as Titanic would rule the waves. Like the designers and commander of Titanic, we are full of ourselves, for the sake of wealth and status plunging into dark and unknown waters, convinced we are unsinkable.

“But imagine instead that you and I are standing watch on the bridge. Squinting into the telescope we can barely make out the terrible iceberg glinting in the moonlight. We look again. There’s no mistake. We sound the alarm. We don’t know at this speed if there’s time to stop or even slow the ship before impact. We can’t know if anything we do will make any difference in the end. But we have to try. We have to try.”⁷

And so we will try here at the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh.

⁷ Ibid., pp. C-6—C-7.