

# Green Sanctuary Inspires Cultural Change

by Sharon A. Baiocco,

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church Unitarian Universalist

Jan. 29, 2012



As we look over our work of six years towards the goal of becoming a UUA Green Sanctuary, I am reminded today that cultural change starts very slowly, and then it accelerates as those who adopt the changes become a critical mass.

I understand it took over 10 years for TJMC to become a Welcoming Congregation, but last year, largely through the efforts of our UU-United Nations Office, the U. N. passed the first ever Gay Rights Protection Resolution. AMAZING! As for the Green Sanctuary Program, we told the Rev. Leslie Takahashi-Morris in January 2006 that we did not have ten years! All life on Earth was threatened by global warming, and we believed humans were the primary cause. Al Gore's film, "An Inconvenient Truth" convinced us that something unprecedented was happening to our environment, and that climate change would become unavoidable within a decade.

Through three years of program-building and three years of interim ministries, our small group of six people, including three octogenarians, were driven by this belief. We were determined to educate, inspire, and lead our congregation to become a Green Sanctuary and to prepare our community for the future we foresaw. Along the way, others of you joined us, accompanying us into attics, basements, and closets as we conducted our environmental audit, installing energy conservation measures, preaching from the pulpit, serving at potlucks and brunches, organizing field trips, planting gardens and trees, speaking to other faith communities, educating our children, watching our films, and carpooling to services.

In those same six years, the average annual concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere has risen from 382 ppm to 391.5 ppm. (*National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in the United States.*) Our Congress failed to pass an energy bill, two world energy summits failed to produce an agreement, and we witnessed the BP oil spill in our Gulf and a nuclear disaster in Japan. Closer to home we had an earthquake in Louisa that shut down two nuclear power plants. Clearly, something must change besides the climate!

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And it *is* changing! Now, like the voices of dissent that erupted into the “Arab Spring,” like the Occupy Wall Street movement, and like the 10,000 protesters who changed the President’s mind about the oil pipeline in November, our UU Green Sanctuary movement is making an impact. Yet I have heard a fellow UU say, “There are a lot of environmental groups doing the same thing.” I would respectfully disagree. We are not like the Sierra Club, nor Earth Justice, nor The Nature Conservancy. We are a faith community, and that is key. Our principles bridge the divide between the “heart” of Universalism and the “head” of Unitarianism. To change a culture, I am convinced that evidence and arguments are not enough -- only the arts, inspiration and personal witness can reach the hearts of our leaders, consumers and climate change deniers. Our UU Green Sanctuary movement now includes 182 accredited congregations across the nation. We are reaching a critical mass. Just this week I had coffee with environmental advocates at the Roman Catholic Church of the Incarnation and Unity Church who wanted to learn from us how to motivate their congregations.

After the General Assembly in Charlotte last summer, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association the Rev. Peter Morales published a report, “Going Green Beyond Belief” in response to a call at the previous GA. He said:

Environmentalism, broadly conceived, is in the very soul of Unitarian Universalism, as demonstrated by . . . Unitarian Universalists . . . from Thoreau to Joanna Macy, from every person who commits to Ethical Eating to passionate activists such as UU Tim DeChristopher, who faces 10 years in federal prison for disrupting a federal oil and gas lease in Utah.

It has been 15 years since “[Environmental Justice](#),” the historic General Assembly resolution, was passed in 1994, directing us to focus on environmental justice and environmental stewardship. We UUs have a deep and thoughtful connection to the Earth that extends much further back. Indeed, a special affinity to the natural world infuses the entire spirit of Unitarian Universalism, as reflected in our seventh principle. . . .

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Today, many of us see environmental issues as among the most urgent and critical matters of our time. Environmental justice is something which I—like many UUs and others—embrace with particular passion.

Here at TJMC we have had an uphill road trying to demonstrate how actions to protect the air, the water, the earth, and all living things are acts of justice. Accustomed to an anthropocentric world view, many of us still fail to recognize that skin color or poverty are not the only markers of injustice. Around the world there are “sacrifice zones” where natural resources like oil, coal, minerals, forests, and water are commandeered from their natural region and exploited by developed and developing nations. Here in Virginia, our neighbors’ mountains in Southwest Virginia are being blown away and people in other Southside counties nearby face radioactive contamination from companies proposing to mine uranium.

According to the *Green Sanctuary Manual*,

Too often the "environmental movement" and the "racial/economic justice movement" have been seen as competing with each other. [Environmental justice](#) is the recognition that the same paradigm of dominion that has led to global warming also reinforces economic and racial inequities. Only by seeking solutions that address both can we solve either.

Today, we take some satisfaction in how far we have come as a faith community. But our Green Sanctuary work must continue. Only 15% of the 63 UU congregations in our Southeast District are Green Sanctuaries, and we are one of three more candidates in Virginia (Williamsburg and Lynchburg are the others). Our Southeast is the third largest contributor to CO2 emissions in the world, equal to the entire Soviet Union, because of our coal-fired power plants.

Now I would like to invite the Green Sanctuary Steering Committee to stand and be recognized. We will need more people like these leaders to join us. They have volunteered their talents, their time, and even their money,

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sometimes, to promote the Green Sanctuary program. We owe them a great big hug and words of thanks for their magnificent work. There are many more. Would all those Green Sanctuary leaders who took part in our 12 Action Projects please stand and be recognized? Thank you so much.

Because we are a team, I asked members to tell me why they were active in the Green Sanctuary Program.

Deborah Judson-Ebbets wrote:

I am particularly happy to see our Green Sanctuary Arboretum and our partnering with other groups in the community like Transition Charlottesville-Albemarle, the Sierra Club and Bellair Farm.

Ruth Douglas wrote:

In the long run, the health of our planet is the most pressing challenge the world faces. The coming changes will reduce the biodiversity of the living things on our planet and in fact, this is already happening. . . . All these negative changes will also have terrible impacts on humans around the planet, generally affecting the poorest among us the most, but dramatically affecting the more fortunate of us as well.

Sallie Kate Park wrote:

When people think “Oh, I’m just one person & what difference can I make?” Well, one drop of water looks like nothing, but, when combined with many others, look what one can have – a bubbling creek, a lovely pond, even our oceans! All our little individual efforts combined to save energy do add up and help our environment.

Glenn Short wrote:

Speaking very personally, working with Sharon on the Green Sanctuary & other environmental issues, has given me -- a WW II Veteran-- an overriding purpose and passion which will prolong my life. If our team has caused some TJMC friends to modify their life styles, we thereby all become part of a worldwide movement adapting

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to inevitable oncoming changes. This is a noble cause which will not only alter our way of life, but will transform us spiritually.

So it is with a grateful heart that I thank the Board and the congregation for your ongoing support. You GET IT!

Now we have come to the time when we ask the congregation if they have any questions about the report, and then we will read the motion and ask you to vote to approve the accreditation application of the Green Sanctuary Task Force.

You should have the motion in your order of service.

MOTION to Approve:

*The Green Sanctuary Task Force of TJMC-UU hereby moves to recommend approval by the Board and the congregation of its Report and Application for Green Sanctuary designation at the next Congregational Meeting Jan. 29, 2012.*

*Unitarian Universalists are committed to the 7th Principle, "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." The mission of the Green Sanctuary Program of Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church, Unitarian Universalist is to transform our congregation and its practices into a beacon of environmental sustainability and justice.*

*We affirm that religion should be more than a belief and support system. It should also be what we practice each day in the routine of living—in relationships, in neighborhoods, in public and private enterprises. Each of us will strive to participate in the environmental communities that surround our church. We will seek to bring about a more "green," humane world for all peoples. We will support activities that sustain Earth; we will struggle against those who would destroy it. Through our religious practices we hope to continue as a community that loves life and seeks to nurture Earth for all future generations.*

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*In recognition of the universal right to a clean and livable environment, as well as the fragility of Earth and of all living things, we join together to add our efforts to protect and maintain the health, vitality, beauty and diversity of our planet Earth and its life-giving resources.*

*We request that in addition to voting to approve the Green Sanctuary application, we each individually commit ourselves to becoming more informed about the ways our choices and behaviors impact the earth and to choose wherever possible, sustainability and the health of the living Earth. We strive to live lightly and to reduce our environmental impact through our shopping and energy choices. We affirm and promote programs to educate and demonstrate best practices in these vital areas affecting the health and sustainability of the Earth. We incorporate Seventh Principle values and practices into our worship services, celebrations, and religious education programs.*

*As members of this congregation and as participants in the Green Sanctuary program, we pledge our encouragement to one another in a personal and congregational commitment to living this promise through our Unitarian Universalist principles.*

Thank you.

The Green Sanctuary Task Force respectfully requests congregational approval of our application to the UUA for Green Sanctuary designation.