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Caring for creation: Utah churches aim to lessen their impact on the Earth

By [Susan Whitney](#)

Deseret Morning News

In England, it is against the law to disturb the roosting place of bats, even if they are living in the eaves of your church. Bats are endangered.

Of course, if your congregation is one of the more than 6,000 that have joined the nation's Wildlife Trust "Living Churchyards," you are proud when the bats choose your belfry. You are happy about all the mammals, insects, birds and wild grasses that flourish around your house of worship.

Nettles, too. You're glad for the nettles growing around the graves.

And lichen. English churchgoers seem proud of the lichen on walls and headstones. In British newspapers they talk reverently about how slowly lichen grows and how colorful it is. They would no more spray herbicide around their house of worship, these living churchyard folks, than they would dream of calling an exterminator for the bats.

In photos, the long-grass churchyards are lovely, like something out of Thomas Hardy. In practice, however, caring for God's green Earth is not without complications.

Snakes have been spotted in the tall weeds of the living churchyards — mostly grass snakes but occasionally an adder. Sometimes a human is found sleeping under the hedgerows. Tourists come searching for the graves of their ancestors, and a few have left angry notes about the upkeep, not realizing the grass is unmowed on purpose.

Then, too, the bat guano tends to accumulate, and the congregation may have a hard time finding someone to clean it up. So, yes,



Laura Seitz, Deseret Morning News

Progress continues on the construction of the energy-efficient office building at St. Mark's Cathedral in Salt Lake City. Global warming is mobilizing a religious response across the nation in an effort to "practice what they preach" about caring for God's creation.



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congregations have reached the point that they complain to the trust. Then the trust sends out a crew to relocate the bats.

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Here in Utah, believers have their own methods of honoring God's creation. They work hard to save the Earth, some of them, even when it is complicated. Increasingly, they are talking to each other about what God wants and about what is possible. They are willing to listen when people of other faiths — or of no faith at all — seek to influence their decisions.



Val Crompton, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

Parishioners on the grounds of the Adel churchyard, where grass and weeds are left to grow to provide wildlife habitat.

Elaine Emmi, a Quaker and head of Utah's Interfaith Roundtable, says global warming is mobilizing a religious response across the nation. She says believers have always cared about creation and some have even hired environmental lobbyists — but now they are coming together around one very specific question: "What can we do to reduce our carbon footprint?"

This fall, Emmi says, the Interfaith Roundtable will announce a new venture, Utah

Interfaith Power and Light. The plan is to encourage every Utahn to make a pledge to lower energy use.

Their first event will include giving away compact fluorescent light bulbs. "If everyone in the state used them, we might not need to build new power plants," she says.

The Utah group will be loosely affiliated with the national Interfaith Power and Light group, which has sent a letter, signed by leaders of a dozen different faiths, calling for the president and Congress to take immediate action on global warming. Emmi acknowledges that a lot of Utahns probably do want some action from their government. However, she says, she is committed to keeping the Utah Interfaith effort free from partisan politics. They'll focus on things like making buildings more energy-efficient.

Emmi knows individual churches are already working through their larger denominations on energy efficiency and recycling and a variety of projects. (For instance, according to church spokesman Scott Trotter, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has partnered with Rocky Mountain Power on a conservation program that has resulted in big energy savings. The lighting in the Church Office Building has just been updated and the more efficient lamps and ballast consume 50 percent less energy than the old lighting did.)

Emmi believes the Interfaith Power and Light can help Utah's various denominations to inspire each other. And she credits Holladay United Church of Christ



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and First Unitarian Church for inspiring her.

At First Unitarian, for example, Joan Gregory coordinates the environmental ministry. Over the years, the Unitarians have tried a dozen approaches, from teaching classes on voluntary simplicity to setting up a table on Sundays where worshippers can drop by to learn more about carbon offsetting.

"We have to do something more than just wash our cups," Gregory says, referring to the fact that they avoid Styrofoam.

As for her Quaker congregation, Emmi says they've spent months studying about their impact on the Earth. They are considering going solar. For one thing, solar panels might encourage others, Emmi says. "If a congregation of only 40 people can do this ... "

Of course, Emmi adds, they know their 100-year-old building needs storm windows and weather-stripping. "Solar is sexy," she says. But the congregation might not have enough money to do everything they'd like.

The new offices of the Episcopal Diocese of Utah, currently under construction on 100 South, may well be the best local example of an energy-efficient church building.

Steve Hutchinson says the diocese has constructed and remodeled a number of buildings lately, learning more about green construction as they go. (Their new church in Price is insulated to a value of R44, for example.)

The diocese offices will save 40 percent on heating and air-conditioning costs, due to an innovative system of wells that will tap groundwater, circulate it, then return it to the earth. Of course this new system was expensive, costing \$160,000, and the diocese won't make up the initial outlay for a decade.



Val Crompton, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

A parishioner checks out the Adel churchyard in Leeds, Yorkshire, England. Caring for God's green Earth is complicated.

Val Crompton, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

The Adel churchyard in Leeds, Yorkshire, England.

So the decisions about energy efficiency are made carefully and always prayerfully, Hutchinson says. However, he says, "our denomination, from the national church through the diocese, has been committed to the environment for a long time."

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A few weeks ago, through their connections with the Interfaith Roundtable, employees of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance found themselves at a dinner hosted by the LDS Church

at the Joseph Smith Memorial Building. Deeda Seed, SUWA development manager, thought hard about what she, "not a religious person," was going to say over the food.

She knew she'd be dining with Catholic nuns, several Protestant pastors and a number of LDS faithful — all of whom might expect some sort of blessing. In the end, Seed said, "I give thanks to the forces of

nature and the universe, which I barely understand, but which somehow have the capacity for bringing people together to talk peacefully and energetically."

During the dinner discussion, Seed says, "we asked people to speak from the heart." As they did, taking turns talking about how much Utah's wild lands have meant to them, Seed says she heard her love of the land echoed around the room. She got teary. Others did, too, she says.

After the dinner, SUWA published a list of areas of agreement, including, "Wilderness connects us to something larger than ourselves." Not everyone may call it God, this "larger" connection. However, the shared experience of something larger through nature, Seed says, "allows us to come together in a profound way."

George Handley, professor of humanities at Brigham Young University, went to the SUWA dinner. Handley teaches environmental literature courses and says today's college students care much more deeply about the Earth than his students did 10 years ago.

He doesn't claim to be an expert, but Handley says as he grew more interested in ecology, he became more aware of the points in Mormon doctrine that reflect on creation.

For example, there is the doctrine that says God created the world spiritually before he created it physically. And every church president since Joseph Smith has had something to say about stewardship of land and animals, Handley adds. He'll give a public talk about religion and the environment next Saturday. (See related link at top.)

Caring about the Earth can cause huge ethical dilemmas, notes Elise Lazar, who also came to the SUWA dinner. This is her current painful dilemma: How do you love your neighbor who is building a house that you believe is too big?

Lazar describes herself as culturally Jewish, not as a practitioner of the religion. Still, when she read about tikkun olam, she connected with her religious heritage in a new way, she says.

Tikkun olam is explained, in Jewish religious thought, as the belief that as the world was created, the earthen vessel on which we live was unable to contain all of God's light. It is our duty, as his people, to keep working toward the world's perfection.

Last Christmas, Lazar gave out compact fluorescent light bulbs, including leaders of the LDS Church on her gift list. Along with the bulbs, she wrote a letter explaining the concept of tikkun olam.

In a similar way, E.O. Wilson sought to educate when he was in Utah last February. The Pulitzer Prize-winning biologist was raised as a Baptist. He no longer believes in God, but he knows how to talk to those who value creation as God's handiwork.

So he travels the country speaking about the shared values of science and faith. When he came to Utah, he met with LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley.

Wilson's latest book, "The Creation," has been well received. But a small minority of reviewers thought it sounded condescending, were troubled by the way a nonbeliever like Wilson presumes to tell believers what their faith requires.

In person, though, Wilson's earnestness is evident. His specialty is insects, and he is passionate about the miracle of small details. He longs

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to preserve every vacant lot and field, every tangle of sunbaked weeds.

Meanwhile, the closest thing the United States has to Great Britain's "Living Churchyards" is the National Wildlife Federation's "Churchyard Habitat" program. Roxanne Paul of the NFW reports only one church in the state has registered as a habitat church, Murray Park Church of Christ in Murray.

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On a weekday morning, if you drop by the the Murray Park church, you'll see no sign of humans. But you will see plenty of birds.

The church's official certification of habitat is posted in the window of the tidy-looking building. As for the grounds, well, the lawn has been mowed and the surrounding natural areas feature some xeriscaping-type grasses as well as some random weeds, which have obviously sprung up naturally.

The Murray church owns only a small piece of land. Statistically, this is a small amount of habitat.

Still, every tiny step is significant, Emmi says.

"I think you start with one thing," she says. If you start with energy-efficient light bulbs, then pretty soon every person in your congregation has switched to the bulbs at their homes, too. And then maybe they all start walking to church or carpooling. And maybe the next thing you know, they've stopped spraying for weeds.

Emmi says the Quakers try to avoid spraying for weeds by asking each member of the congregation to pull a weed on Sundays.

She sounds thoughtful as she notes that the yard around their meetinghouse is starting to look a little ratty.

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