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## What Works

**Praise the Lord, but Dim the Lights: The Regeneration Project  
helps the environmental movement get religion.**

By Suzie Boss

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# what works

*Strategies, Approaches, Developments*

## Praise the Lord, but Dim the Lights

The Regeneration Project helps the environmental movement get religion *by Suzie Boss*

When the Rev. Sally Bingham speaks from the pulpit of Grace Cathedral, a landmark Episcopal church atop San Francisco's Nob Hill, she's more likely to preach about saving the Earth than saving souls. Global warming is a moral issue, she tells the faithful: "If you profess a love for God, then you have a responsibility to be a steward of creation."

It's a lofty message. But it turns out that doing the right thing, spiritually speaking, can be as easy as changing a light-bulb. Congregants at Grace Cathedral and thousands of other houses of worship are putting their good stewardship into practice by monitoring their energy use, installing energy-saving appliances, and even placing solar panels near their steeples.

Bingham and her nonprofit organization, the Regeneration Project, have launched the Interfaith Power and Light Campaign, which is gaining converts across the United States – and garnering attention everywhere from Capitol Hill to CNN. The campaign includes 4,000 congregations in 23 state chapters. Starting with their places of worship, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and Christians of all denominations are taking deliberate steps to reduce their carbon footprint. "This kind of effort helps us celebrate our common ground," says Dr. Sayyid Syeed of the Islamic Society of North America.

While bridging religious differences, Bingham and colleagues have learned strategies more common in the corporate world than in the faith community. They've added evaluation, branding, and multimedia marketing to their clerical repertoires. "Religious people are kind and gentle and loving, but sometimes we fall behind the rest of the world in our ability to get things done," she acknowledges. "I've learned that I can be a deeply religious person and still be practical and businesslike."

### Let There Be Green Light

Bingham, now 66 and president of the Regeneration Project, founded the nonprofit while she was a late-blooming seminary student. She had been a stay-at-home mom until starting college at age 45. A lifetime Episcopalian and nature lover, Bingham was troubled by the disconnect she saw between faith and ecology. The environmental movement seemed to belong to the secular world, even though every mainstream religion calls on the faithful to care for the Earth. "I thought the people in the pews should be the ones leading



The Reverend Sally Bingham communes with solar panels on top of the San Francisco Zen Center. Her organization works with religious congregations to promote green energy.

the environmental movement," she says. With a fellow seminarian, she started the Regeneration Project as a way to "talk to congregations about their responsibility for stewardship." But there was no real action plan with clear goals, and the project sat dormant.

By 1997, Bingham was an ordained priest with a reputation for her environmental ministry. As California deregulated its energy industry, she saw an opportunity to convince congregations to buy clean power. "Now we had a focus: renewable energy for congregations," she says.

### RALLYING THE RELIGIOUS

- Appeal to the shared values of diverse groups
- Combine local autonomy with a strong national brand
- Use multimedia appeals to expand demographics
- Monitor outcomes to attract funding



Bingham started close to home, encouraging Episcopal churches in California to choose renewable power sources such as wind and solar energy. When her efforts earned a few column inches in *The Wall Street Journal*, the W. Alton Jones Foundation gave the Regeneration Project \$30,000 – the organization’s first grant. Then came a matching grant.

And behold, grant reporting showed Bingham the power of metrics: “We could show measurable differences. How many churches were buying renewable energy? How much carbon dioxide was this taking out of the atmosphere? These are the kinds of things that funders want to know.”

Then in 2000, the California energy crisis sent the renewable energy market into a tailspin. “Green marketers left California or went bankrupt,” Bingham recalls. “Overnight, Episcopal churches that were buying renewable switched back to brown power,” typically based on fossil fuels.

## Go Forth and Multiply

Determined not to lose momentum, Bingham regrouped by reaching out to the larger faith community. By partnering with the interdenominational California Council of Churches, the Regeneration Project found a way to scale up immediately. “Instead of reaching 450 Episcopal churches, now we had access to 50,000 houses of worship,” she says.

Bingham hired her first campaign manager and refined the organization’s message to appeal to all denominations. Within a year, the Regeneration Project convinced 135 congregations to join the California Interfaith Power and Light Campaign and to take steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions at their places of worship. In 2001, with funding from the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, the campaign went national. It now operates in 23 states.

Participating congregations sign a “covenant,” agreeing that they will take concrete steps to cut greenhouse gas emissions. Their activities range from delivering environmental sermons to organizing green study groups. The national campaign provides educational materials but lets local members decide how to reduce their carbon footprint. An annual conference allows leaders to share best practices.

Father Charles Morris, who heads the Michigan chapter, has installed solar panels and a wind turbine atop his Catholic church in Wyandotte. Elaine Emmi, who is on the steering committee of Utah Interfaith Power and Light, participated in an energy audit of the 100-year-old building that serves as her Quaker meetinghouse near Salt Lake City. “We need to weather-strip and insulate – it’s just a sieve,” she says. Iowa promotes Cool Congregations, where members stick to low-energy household “diets” with the help of support groups. In

Georgia, a Jewish congregation has developed a Hanukkah kit. It comes with eight compact fluorescent lights, an energy study guide, and a lightbulb joke for every day of the holiday.

Local flexibility appeals to people of diverse beliefs in states with diverse energy policies. Georgia, for instance, still gets 70 percent of its power from coal. Utah, which is dominated by one religion, has an abundance of solar and wind power. “One of the reasons this effort is so successful is that we get support from the national level without being told we have to follow one particular model,” says Katy Hinman, executive director of Georgia Interfaith Power and Light.

“You have to understand the communities you’re talking to,” says Bingham. Discussing cost savings, not theology, is what brings many Michigan churches into the Interfaith fold, says Fr. Morris. In contrast, appealing to social justice – specifically, serving the poor – is more likely to resonate with evangelical Christian communities than is talking about the science of global warming.

## The Power of Branding

State chapters can be flexible when it comes to implementation, but they are expected to follow national branding guidelines. “We want the name recognition of the Interfaith Power and Light Campaign,” Bingham explains. “When we go to Washington as an interfaith group to talk about policy, we have visibility. We don’t have a political perspective. We can talk to both Republicans and Democrats. That gives us a unique voice in this dialogue.”

Although unabashedly spiritual, the Interfaith campaign has learned to adopt newfangled gadgetry. “I used to say we had to avoid e-mail because half the churches don’t have computers,” Bingham admits. “Some parish secretaries can barely use answering machines!”

Then along came a young, tech-savvy staffer who suggested posting a few videos on YouTube. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Now Bingham no longer hesitates to embrace new marketing ideas. Her campaign brought Hollywood to the heartland in 2006 when it sponsored screenings and discussions of *An Inconvenient Truth* for 4,000 congregations. The Regeneration Project has also produced its own film, *Lighten Up*, about the religious response to global warming.

With a \$1 million budget and a staff of seven in 2007, the Regeneration Project is enjoying a surge that seemed unlikely just a few years earlier. Showing people a better way to live comes naturally to the religious community, points out Hinman, a United Methodist. “Critics may say it’s going to take a miracle. Well, guess what? That’s what we do.” □