

For the beauty of the Earth (by Jessica Luton)

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Tucked inside the First Presbyterian Church of Milledgeville, near one of the interior entrances to the sanctuary, is a “green corner.” With information on where to recycle anything from plastic containers to batteries locally, this little nook is exemplary of the new “green initiative” task force the church has started. Everything used in the green corner—from a shoebox to hold batteries that will be recycled, to the Styrofoam earth model – has been repurposed or reused from materials that environmental advocate and church deacon Debbie Harshbarger found at her home or at the church.

“When we were looking at the green corner, I worked really hard to recycle and reuse everything that went in there,” said Harshbarger. “The boxes, stickers on the boxes and all. I thought, let me see how far I can go. That big planet thing was just a big piece of Styrofoam destined for the trash. I was trying to set an example there.”

The green corner is just the start of the church’s efforts to educate its congregation and the community about the importance of environmental stewardship. Interest in green education began in January when Harshbarger became a deacon at the church and inquired with others about an interest in starting a green program. After some discussion and an initial meeting, the church formed a “green task force.”

“I came on board as a deacon in January and was speaking with one of the other deacons about the possibility of starting a green initiative. We had a wonderful response at our initial meeting on the topic. About a dozen people came out and we were very excited by the initial showing,” she said. “So, we decided to designate a task force. We have been planning a series of activities, especially this being Earth Day month.

The list of activities, meetings and green educational programs the church has been offering its members, youth and the community is numerous. The first of the events to be held was a “green luncheon” hosted by the church’s youth group. At the luncheon, the youth talked with other members of the church about being good stewards of the environment by cutting back on some practices such as the use of plastic bags. The event was green in more than one way though; held on St. Patrick’s Day weekend, the event offered vegetarian food and served as a fundraiser for the church’s youth group to travel to West Virginia to learn about and volunteer in a community that has been hard hit by environmentally damaging mountaintop removal.

“They’re going to West Virginia, which has been very hard hit because of the manner they did the coal mining,” said interim church minister Gay Brown. “They are taking time to learn about the causes of the actual problem and they’re going to do some mission work for the individual people that have been hardest hit by poor planning. There’s been some flooding because of it and they’re working to help people who’ve been hurt by the flooding. They’re going to tour a coal mine while they’re there and talk to a number of people involved in this and are trying to figure out the mess that we’ve caused.”

This year the church also participated in the annual worldwide program known as Earth Hour, during which organizers asked people to who want to make a statement about the importance of being environmental stewards to turn out their lights from 8:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. on March 28. To make the event a little more interesting, the church decided to hold a progressive dinner. A group of participants from the church made their way to several houses for different courses of the meal and arrived at the final home just in time to turn off the lights, light a few candles and enjoy dessert and great conversation.

On March 22, the church held a presentation by Climate Project representative Sam Collier and faith-based, eco-friendly speaker Thatcher Young. The speakers walked both church members and other interested individuals from the community through a presentation meant to educate people on the scientific damage that energy use has on the environment and also had a portion of the presentation dedicated to questions from the audience and economical solutions to going green.

Among the many informative topics covered in the presentation, Collier highlighted one way to combat the skeptical beliefs of some people on the issue of global warming. According to Collier, in the last 10 years, there have been 928 peer-reviewed articles on global warming and 0 percent of them have doubt as to the cause of global warming: Excess amounts of carbon in the earth's atmosphere.

"We're running an uncontrolled experiment on the only atmosphere we have," said Collier. "We're disrupting the balance and it is our moral obligation to be stewards of that life."

Beyond the scientific basis for being environmental stewards, Collier and Thatcher went on to educate the audience on how to go about making improvements in their own lives that would make a positive impact on the environment without costing a fortune. The presentation also equipped attendees with information on how to speak up for the movement by getting in touch with elected officials and pressing them on environmental and conservation issues.

"Our grandchildren will wonder why," said Collier. "It all starts with us and we have to afford it."

As a result of their educational efforts, the church's property committee is now working on ways the congregation can make the building more energy efficient, said Harshbarger.

"The property committee is interested in creating a long-term plan to make our building more energy efficient," said Harshbarger. "We can't tell you right now that everything is perfect, but we're striving to reach that point. As things need to be replaced, we will replace them with energy efficient appliances. But I guess our greatest recycle effort is our building and we're keeping it going and we should be able to make it a very green facility eventually."

In addition to the church's already extensive recycling efforts of every day items such as plastic, glass and cardboard, the church is also trying other ways to reuse articles by donating items such as cell phones and ink jet cartridges to organizations in the community that collect them such as the Boys & Girls Club. The church also collects batteries so that they may be disposed of properly and has also arranged to have compact fluorescent light bulbs, which are difficult to dispose of and dangerous to the environment if they're disposed of incorrectly, picked up once a certain number of them have been collected.

On Earth Day, April 22, the church held a screening of "Kilowatt Ours," an informative documentary that details exactly where the energy people use comes from.

"Most people have no idea where their power comes from," said Harshbarger. "They don't think about it, but one kilowatt hour is the equivalent of one pound of coal. You can look at your power bill, and then try and think of that in terms of how much coal you use and your start getting those visuals."

The church also planned to hold another potluck dinner and presentation April 26 by a couple from Athens—a town engulfed in the environmental movement.

The church held additional events leading up to Earth Day, but their campaign for environmental stewardship for the good of the local community will persist beyond April 22. In fact, most of the seasoned members of this congregation say that environmentalism, to some effect, has been a part of the church's advocacy issues for quite some time.

"This church has always wanted to be on the front line," said interim minister Brown. "Years ago, they made a rule that we would not use Styrofoam plates or cups. We use things that

last. The appetite there and then Debbie (Harshbarger) came along and said, "Let me help you to move forward."

Harshbarger is quick to point the finger away from herself as the center of this movement.

"I don't feel like I'm really starting a program, but jump-starting a program that originated from the '90s," she said.

The current First Presbyterian Green Initiative, aimed at helping the church and the Milledgeville community to be better stewards of the earth and its resources, is just the latest in a series of church programs to support these issues. In the early '90s, the FPC Board of Deacons, in conjunction with the Girl Scout troop meeting in the church facility, helped initiate the first recycling program in Milledgeville. Materials were hauled 35 miles to Macon for recycling. About a year later, the City of Milledgeville picked up the program and has provided recycling to city residents ever since.

The church has a long history of commitment to environmental and social justice. In fact, the Union Theological Seminary has given national recognition to the church for its ongoing efforts in the area, with the Elinor Curry Award for Outreach and Social Concern.

At about the same time that the church was advocating a recycling program in the '90s, an Atlanta landfill operator was preparing to develop the largest waste disposal site in the Southeast in a rural community between Milledgeville and Sparta. Ten thousand tons of garbage a day, from all over the Southeast, would have been dumped at the site. The environmental ramifications would have been devastating for the area, one of the poorest socio-economic settings in the state. In face of huge corporate financial interests, only seven Hancock County residents had legal standing before the court to oppose the landfill. Three accepted payment to withdraw their opposition, one moved from the region, but three women stood firmly opposed.

Together, the women were offered more than a quarter of a million dollars to drop their opposition to the landfill and their attorney, a member of First Presbyterian, was offered \$100,000 in legal fees to drop the lawsuit, but each refused. The developer, aware of the woman's commitment to their tiny African Methodist Episcopal Church, which sat near the site, made an offer to air condition the church, hoping to divide the church members and put pressure on the women. Still, the women would not give in.

The members of First Presbyterian invited the three women and the members of their church to a Sunday morning service where their actions were recognized and they were presented with a \$4,200 check to pay for the air conditioning of the A.M.E. church. The women's suit was upheld, and the landfill did not come to Hancock County.

In addition to these efforts, the church has been an advocate for a wide range of other social issues. For more than 25 years, the church has held a prison family luncheon once a month to make the day-long visit for family members of prisoners a little easier. The church brings offers of canned or boxed food to donate to the food pantry operated by DFCS. The church provides hundreds of blankets for homeless men and women that are distributed through the Atlanta-based organization known as The Open Door. The church's youth group has traveled to Mexico to help build houses for poor families living in substandard housing for many years.

Harshbarger is excited and motivated by the interest and commitment she's seen by the people in the community and in the church and hopes that other people take interest in the environment as an important social issue, she said.

"This is a really good time to capture people's attention because they're trying to save money," she said. "Our goal is really to try and educate people and in the process help protect it for future generations."