

## Industry News

### Faithfully Green: Unitarian Universalist Church of Fresno Builds a New Church With an Eye Toward Being Eco-Friendly.

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By Ron Orozco, The Fresno Bee, Calif.

Aug. 4--Churches are built all the time, often with plans that cut costs and stay with the basics -- foundation, walls, roof. And maybe some stained-glass windows.

But the new \$4 million Unitarian Universalist Church, which will hold its first service Sunday, was built with a lot of consideration to energy efficiency and the environment, even if it meant paying more.

"You have to trouble yourself to do this, but the reason we did is the planet's in trouble if we don't," says the Rev. Bryan Jessup, the church's minister.

The Fresno facility features a 400-seat sanctuary with a light scoop that takes advantage of natural light, and a kitchen that uses recycled flooring made from sawdust and linseed oil.

The urinals in the men's room are made of recycled soda bottles. And the landscaping has plants that don't need much watering.

The church is the first California congregation to comply with many of the green construction standards set by Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, the benchmark adopted by the U.S. Green Building Council.

In several months, LEED officials will reward the Fresno congregation with a special plaque for its efforts.

"Plaque, schmack -- our faith calls us to do this, and it's a truckload of trouble," Jessup says.

The troubles included finding and buying just the right property, asking members to pay \$200,000 more than the original budget and completing stacks of forms to comply with the green construction standards.

But in the end, green construction means a great deal to congregation members, who ascribe to the belief that people must live in harmony with each other and their environment.

Unitarian Universalism teaching calls it "respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part."

Members of the Fresno congregation say the green construction represents a good chunk of their faith.

"It's imperative we take care of our planet," Connie Young says. "If there's harm done even to some small creature, or part of the planet, ultimately it comes back to us."

Another congregant, Anidelle Flint, says Unitarian Universalists have a greater responsibility to be good stewards and to take care of the Earth.

"It's the home for all of us," Flint says.

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Fresno was founded in 1953, when it rented space from Temple Beth Israel in downtown Fresno. The church moved to a facility on North Millbrook Avenue in central Fresno in 1963, but congregants have struggled with space problems. Some have attended services from the social hall, which opens into the sanctuary.

After a growth spurt raised membership to more than 300, the congregation reached a crossroads in 2002: Move to a larger existing facility, or build a new one?

Members voted to build.

The Unitarian Universalist Association doesn't require member congregations planning new facilities to build green. However, it encourages them to establish "Green Sanctuary" committees, which conduct audits to ensure church programs are doing their part to become environment-friendly.

After buying five acres on East Alluvial Avenue, the congregation voted that green was the way to go. And all congregational decisions require 80% voting approval. Included was the vote to pay more.

George Burman, project manager and church member, says the green construction costs the congregation about 4% to 5% more than building without the materials conducive to energy efficiency and helpful to the environment.

"Some of the material is more expensive, some of it doesn't make any difference and some of it is less expensive," Burman says. "Some of it also is structurally better, and some of it you just can't avoid."

Flint says green construction was an easy choice to make because Unitarian Universalists such as herself understand the Earth-based faith, which, she says, traces to indigenous people such as American Indians.

"They thought of Earth as Mother Earth and tried not to take more than they needed, tried to return to Earth as much as they could and lived lightly on the land," Flint says.

"Because we are conscious of being in that web of existence, that's one reason to build green -- to take all the steps we can and to preserve it for our children and everyone else."

Congregants also applied their faith in deciding what to do with two houses on the property they bought.

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They decided to remodel one close to Alluvial Avenue into church offices, a nursery and a youth room. They recycled the other home by having it moved to Reedley for a family that had outgrown its home. The alternative was a no-no: Demolish the structure, and haul it to a landfill.

"It's the mantra of recycling -- redo, reuse," Jessup says. "It is consistent with the values that we have."

The projects came with some ups and downs.

For example, Burman easily secured the structural steel, which by law must contain about 85% recycled steel. However, officials needed quite some time to recently reach an agreement with outside investors to pay \$250,000 for a 40-kilowatt solar array.

"Somewhere, sometime, some people have to say, 'OK, we're going to trouble ourselves in this way,' " Jessup says.

The congregation has approved all of the green construction decisions, and it doesn't surprise Jessup. More than 30 members own and operate hybrid vehicles, and others ride bicycles to and from their workplace.

"They have ponied up," Jessup says of the voting approval. "And I've challenged them.

"I'll say, 'You're driving Priuses. Give a Prius' worth to this project. You can do it,' " Jessup says, with a laugh. "And they are putting their money where their faith is."

In going green, the congregation also is growing in other ways. In January, the congregation established a Green Sanctuary committee, headed by Young.

On Earth Day in April, committee members asked congregants to make commitments to regularly doing one more thing for the environment, and 80 responded.

They pledged to check the air pressure on the tires of their vehicles, ride the bus, slow their driving speed by several miles per hour, change to compact fluorescent light bulbs, shut off lights after leaving rooms and not to use disposable products.

"It's real exciting," Young says.

Flint says she can't wait for Sunday to come, particularly when she takes the walkway from the parking lot to the sanctuary. The walkway has a series of pavement inscriptions for visitors to read:

"If love is the doctrine of this church, the quest for truth is its sacrament, and service is its prayer, then we strive to dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge and freedom, to serve humankind and fellowship; to the end, that all souls shall go into harmony with the Divine."

"It's absolutely inspiring," Flint says.

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