

Green Faith

A growing number of religious groups have renewed their efforts to take care of the environment, spurred by the escalating 'green' movement and the ancient teachings of their own faiths. Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, Baha'is and Jains are among the religious groups that are cleaning up beaches and outfitting their places of worship with energy-saving measures, all in the name of religion.

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Caring for Earth part of Sikhism



Central Sikh Temple leaders such as (from left) Mr Dilbagh Singh, Mr Harbans Singh Gholia, Mr Karpal Singh Mehli and Mr Manmohan Singh included green features such as energy-saving lights in their building. -- ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

WHEN the leaders of the Central Sikh Temple in Towner Road decided to renovate the 25-year-old building last year, they were inundated with suggestions - many in a distinct shade of green.

Mr Manmohan Singh, the temple's treasurer, said many in the congregation asked for energy-saving features. 'Some even wanted solar panels. It made us realise that there were a lot of people interested in such issues.'

The solar panels idea had to be ditched as they needed more space than was available, but temple leaders incorporated several other features to make their building more energy-



Sister Molly Lim (left) and Sister Assunta Cheng of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary tending bougainvillea plants in their garden, where they conduct nature walks. -- ST PHOTO: AZIZ HUSSIN

IN THE past year, the nuns of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary have hosted visitors from various Catholic parishes at their home in Holland Road.

On these 'Eco Evenings', the sisters take their guests on guided nature walks in their garden, teach them how to put enzymes to work as a natural detergent and talk about the work of St Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology.

efficient. These included energy-saving lights and air-conditioners, and a lift that uses two-thirds less electricity than the previous one. The interior of the two-storey building is bathed in natural light, so fewer light fittings are required, and the bathrooms have motion-sensor lights and water-saving taps.

Temple president Harbans Singh Gholia said: 'The whole concept of Sikhism is that what God makes has a design for the good of humanity... we must respect all creation, not just man and animals. We live within the ecosystem and don't want to disturb its delicate balance.'

This year, the global Sikh community organised its own Sikh Environment Day on March 14 to encourage Sikhs to meditate upon what their religion teaches about the earth, and the changes they can make in their own lives.

Inspired by the event, the Sikh community here is planning its own environment day. Hymns on nature will be sung, recyclable bags and pamphlets will be given out, and the congregation will be urged to leave their cars at home for the day.

At the end of each session, participants discuss the problems facing the environment and are challenged to make changes to their lifestyles to protect it.

On World Environment Day on Sunday, the Catholic Archdiocese here urged all its parishes to take steps to reduce their collective carbon footprint.

Spurred by the worldwide green movement, Catholics are among several religious groups stepping up their commitment to environmental causes and also relooking what their own ancient teachings say about this.

Increasingly, religious groups have been among those leading the charge for change, cleaning up beaches, installing eco-friendly features in their places of worship and rallying their international counterparts into discussions on what they can do to impede the degradation of the environment.

They are also taking part in larger movements: They were, for example, among the more enthusiastic supporters of Earth Hour, a movement to turn off all lights for an hour on a Saturday in March.

The 10 religious groups in the Inter-Religious Organisation came forward in March to mount a joint exhibition on World Water Day, to showcase the significance of water in their faiths and explain why it is important to conserve it.

Their reason for intertwining God and the environment may differ.

The Catholics, for example, believe caring for the environment is intrinsically linked to caring for the poor, given that people in poverty are often the biggest victims of the impact of global climate change.

The Jains link care for the environment with their religion's teaching of non-violence, while those of the Baha'i faith believe that man, as the highest life form, has a duty to protect the environment.

Recycling a way to show gratitude



Volunteers of Tzu Chi Foundation, a Buddhist group, sorting through plastic, paper and metal items at a recycling point. -- PHOTO: TZU CHI FOUNDATION

Why now?

DR MATHEW Mathews, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said faith groups have been influenced by trends in the broader society.

'Care for the earth, highlighted by environmental groups for some time now, resonates with the teachings and principles in many world religions. It thus makes sense for these groups to champion the environment.'

Others believe the trend may be a result of religious leaders responding to anxiety among their flocks over

EVERY second Sunday of the month, hundreds of volunteers from Buddhist group Tzu Chi Foundation dutifully fan out to the 17 recycling stations they run across the island.

Children as young as three turn up with their grandparents, and students work alongside families from 9am until noon, sorting through the plastic, paper and metal items that people have brought to the recycling points over the month.

The prevalence of recycling initiatives among Buddhist groups stems from gratitude being an important virtue in the religion, say Buddhist leaders.

Mr Yeo Koon Teck, a spokesman for Kong Meng San monastery in Sin Ming, said: 'We take so much from the earth. It's a show of gratitude and of giving back to the earth to fully utilise everything we take.'

In the spirit of this, Kong Meng San has a recycling area within its compound for people to bring their recyclables.

This year, the monastery is going a step further in its recycling efforts: It has started a drive to collect ring tabs from the tops of metal cans.

The tabs will be donated to the Protheses Foundation, which melts them down to create prosthetic limbs for Thai amputees. Kong Meng San aims to collect at least 15 million ring tabs - five tonnes' worth - by the end of November. The tabs can yield about 10,000 prosthetic legs.

environmental disasters.

Mr Russi Ghadiali from the Parsi Zoroastrian Association said: 'Things are getting worse, and it's always the case that when things are not good, people turn to religion.'

If religious groups are acting to protect the environment, they are also doing so because they take the cue from their international counterparts.

Pope Benedict XVI, for example, called environmental degradation a 'pressing moral problem' in late 2009 and called on Catholics worldwide to take care of the environment.

The going is at times rocky

THE pill that combines religion and environmentalism is not always easy to swallow, say religious leaders.

Mr Ghadiali said: 'It's not easy to convince people to change their lifestyles. People generally won't think about changing until they face problems themselves.'

Some groups are getting their adherents warmed up to the idea of taking care of the environment by using holy days and festivals as occasions to raise environmental awareness and bring the 'green' message back to their scriptures.

For instance, the Jains marked this year's festival of Mahavir Jayanti, which celebrates the birth of the founder of Jainism Lord Mahavir, by cleaning up the East Coast Park beach.

Muslim leaders have made changes to their mosques, so their followers will do the same at home. During Ramadan last year, mosques here pledged to cut their utilities bill by 5 per cent this year, and to plant at least 20 plants in their respective compounds.

But some groups have found the pro-green message in outright contradiction to some of their religious practices.

Taoist leaders, for example, have been struggling with the burning of paper offerings; Taoists here believe the practice absolves them and their departed loved ones of their sins.

Younger leaders like Master Chung Kwang Tong of the

Taoist Federation have urged devotees to cut back on it.

He said: 'We tell them it's the sincerity that counts, not 'the more the merrier'. Taoism stresses the balance between man and nature. We take from the environment, so we

shouldn't pollute it. It's us who suffer in the end.'

The Buddhists have their differences over the practice of releasing animals into the wild for good karma, a rite typically carried out on Vesak Day.

Some temples have encouraged the practice of buying birds or terrapins from pet shops and setting them free, but the Buddhist Fellowship, a non-sectarian organisation has been working with the National Parks Board to publicise the harm this does to the ecosystem.

Mr Henry Baey, who heads the Buddhist Fellowship, said: 'We tell people it's not necessarily a kind act. The animals often do not survive, and those that do will upset the existing ecosystem and may harm the native wildlife.'

Dr Mathews believes such intra-religious conflicts can be resolved if religious leaders explain practices most central to the faith.

He said: 'Religious groups have substantial influence over their adherents. When religious leaders proclaim issues as being important considerations for their faithful, adherents are more likely to follow these.'

Dr Mathews sees the trend of mixing God and the environment positively, in that religions add heft to the green cause: 'When religious groups get into the foray, they're really a sizeable group and can do considerably more for the cause.'