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The power of interfaith partnership

Charles Morris | Feb. 20, 2012 Eco Catholic

When Carl Lindquist was growing up in Wisconsin as a young Catholic, he felt a disconnect between his love of the church and his love of God's creation.

In the early 1990s, his prayer was answered when he was invited to head up a new organization in Michigan's Upper Peninsula that would improve a local watershed. That organization, Superior Watershed Partnership and Land Trust (SWP) [1], has, since 1999, expanded to include protection of the entire Upper Peninsula.

Subsidiarity in practice

The most effective aspect of Superior Watershed has been its focus on local initiatives and coalition building.

As Carl said, "So many Great Lakes watershed initiatives are too large. ... We know how the UP works and how these communities can work together."

As a consequence, Superior Watershed is able to effectively leverage its resources. For example, after speaking to a gathering of dentists, 30 dental offices in the area voluntarily installed mercury-amalgam separators, reducing mercury discharged into Lake Superior by 19 percent.

Another example of partnership is a climate change education/adaption program at Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. Superior Watershed joined another nonprofit in weatherizing 200 homes in Munising and Grand Marais, the two largest communities near the national park. The partners are working with planning commissions along the shoreline to develop adaptation strategies. And, Carl told me, this is the first time in the 20 years he has lived and worked in Marquette that there is no ice visible over Patridge Bay, which opens to Lake Superior.

Superior Watershed has been successful in restoring habitats as well, helping threatened trout make a 70 percent comeback.

Faith community as key

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Superior Watershed's key partner in the last several years has perhaps been the Upper Peninsula's faith community.

In 2004, Superior Watershed and Rev. John Magnuson, a Lutheran chaplain, brought together leaders from nine denominations (now expanded to include Jewish and Muslim participation) across the Upper Peninsula to form Earthkeepers.

Each year near Earth Day, Superior Watershed contacts more than 200 congregations across the UP and enlists parishioners in an action of environmental stewardship. An average of 20 churches serve as collection sites across 20 communities. One year, they handed out 100,000 energy-efficient compact fluorescent light bulbs. Another year, they planted 10,000 trees. The Earthkeepers have also enlisted people of faith in beach and stream cleanups.

Perhaps Superior Watershed's greatest success has been the collection of electronic waste, including old computers, televisions and other electronic equipment, for recycling. A few years ago, those 20 churches collected 312 tons of e-waste in just three hours -- from 9 a.m. until noon. That was an average of two tons each minute. That is the largest single collection of e-waste ever recorded by a community organization in a single day -- more than the city of Chicago or Milwaukee in a similar endeavor -- among a population base of fewer than 300,000 people.

In addition, Superior Watershed has partnered with Michigan Interfaith Power & Light to bring energy stewardship to Upper Peninsula congregations.

Of the congregations who partner with Superior Watershed, more than a third of them are Catholic. The power of the record-breaking collections represents the vision of what ecumenism and church can be when the focus is the Body of Christ in action. When so much press attention is placed on position statements of official church bodies, the witness of Superior Watershed reminds us that the real work of the Gospel is found where people are "doers of the word and not hearers only" (James 1:22). Or, as the old hymn says, "We will work with each other. We will work side by side. ... And they'll know we are Christians by our love."

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Links:
[1] http://www.superiorwatersheds.org