

GreenFaith fellows work for the world's future

Patricia Lefevere | Apr. 20, 2009



Sr. Doretta Cornell (Patricia Lefevere)

As a Girl Scout intent on earning her "Tree" badge, Helen Cornell memorized the names of all the trees she saw, preserved samples of their leaves and rustled the best acorn she could find, planting it behind the family's house in the Bronx. When her mother moved out 40 years later, the oak towered over the garage.

Such feats do not create an environmentalist, but they sure help, Cornell noted during an interview with *NCR*. In recent years Cornell — now Doretta Cornell, a Sister of Divine Compassion — has been probing new dimensions of compassion, the hallmark and charism of the congregation that the former English teacher and poet now serves in full-time leadership. Outreach to the downtrodden and marginalized in society has also brought the congregation's 95 religious women and its 72 associates face to face with suffering Mother Earth.

Recently Cornell began training to become a GreenFaith fellow, in an 18-month program that prepares lay and ordained leaders from diverse faith traditions for religiously based environmental leadership.

Enrollees attend three weekend retreats centered on spirituality, sustainability and social justice. They write their own eco-theological statement as well as an ecological autobiography. Fellows also make a scientific review of global environmental issues, learning to speak confidently to a lay audience on scientific dimensions of environmental concerns.

Churches have been slow to engage in the environmental movement, noted the Rev. Fletcher Harper, an Episcopal priest and the executive director of GreenFaith, a 17-year-old organization headquartered in New Brunswick, N.J. But all that is changing, he said, noting that 40 religious and lay leaders have graduated or are training in the GreenFaith Fellowship Program, now in its third year. Rabbi Lawrence Troster, a nationally known religious environmental leader, heads the program.

While Catholics comprise only six of the 40 participants so far, GreenFaith is recruiting Catholics through the existing Catholic fellows and through outreach to Catholic networks. During the coming year, GreenFaith will be organizing two-day conferences for seminaries and clergy and lay leaders in major urban centers around the nation. "We hope to partner with a number of Catholic seminaries" to bring introductory education about ecological issues and religious responses to a large audience," Harper said.

Faith into practice

At a recent chapter meeting Cornell handed out compact fluorescent bulbs to all the sisters. She is also working closely with the facilities manager to make the convent energy efficient inside and out. Plans are underway to redo the roads along the 12-acre property, plant gardens, collect water and conduct an environmental study. The nuns are making conscious efforts to buy hybrid cars and use green cleaning products, she said.



For Cornell the science about global warming is real. It's

happening," she said. But she is not numbed by statistics or dire threats of global collapse. As Christians, we should get over our fear of doing something, she said. "Don't be afraid to try something else, to take new actions."

Shifting to public transportation and to alternative fuels and lowering or eliminating our habits of consumption are all actions that can and must begin now, Cornell said.

So too is altering our diet and our driving habits, said Notre Dame Sr. Kathleen Deignan, who recently became a GreenFaith fellow. Such changes "will be huge," she predicted, requiring sacrifices if Earth is to survive with humans on board.

"We need Catholic leaders in this movement. We need them to ask: "What am I eating, wearing, driving? Where am I going?" said Deignan, a performance artist and professor of religious studies at Iona College in New Rochelle, N.Y.

Her religious community has granted her unpaid leave from Iona so that she can develop "The Great Work Project." The initiative is Deignan's vehicle for creating resources for communities and individuals who want to transform their ecological awareness and practice. Its name comes from what theologian Passionist Fr. Thomas Berry calls "the Great Work" of our time "to reinvent the human/earth relationship."

There's no better place to do this work than in our communities and parishes, Deignan says. She spins a dream of churches convening a community of green evangelists who could go into civic centers and classrooms. She prays that every parish, Catholic school and religious order will send one representative to GreenFaith for training.

But Deignan knows well that time is running out. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has urged that significant steps be taken in the next two to three years if we are to prevent large areas of the Earth from becoming unable to support human life.

"We have 10 years at most to do something," she said. She recalled that not long ago, hardly anyone exercised and everyone smoked. Millions have changed habits.

She believes priests and bishops need to speak out, and hopes the pope will issue an encyclical on the environment soon. "The headlines beg for an ecological exegesis; our Lent and our Advent liturgies beg for an

ecological expression," Deignan told *NCR*.

The church that once told its followers not to eat meat on Friday must now have them refrain from fish, said the nun. The world is "on an Omega-3 high" that threatens fish species everywhere, she said.

Harder to give up than fish, she said, is our urge to procreate, but "we have to restrain our reproductive life" if the planet is to survive. "How can we say we're pro-life and yet not look at the choices we're making? Our planet that once supported all life is now on life support," she said. The situation calls the church to ask married couples: "Can you restrain your urge to reproduce?" she said.

Deignan also called attention to the waste that issues from consumeristic lifestyles, saying that the church needs to stress the Gospel virtues of simplicity and caring for the poor.

Toxic tours

In her 18 months of GreenFaith training, Deignan said she felt outrage during a "toxic tour" of factories and dumps, especially at the site of a former Agent Orange plant in Newark, N.J., whose deadly chemical sink was leeching into the Passaic River "right next to a public housing complex." "The poor have no voice in getting rid of this waste," Deignan said.

Passionist Fr. Joe Mitchell has experienced similar outrage when visiting the west end of Louisville, Ky. The priest directs the Passionist Earth & Spirit Center in Louisville.



In July, Mitchell will conduct "a consciousness-raising tour" of

an area on the banks of the Ohio River where a coal-fired power plant and a large number of chemical industries have fouled the city's air and waterways. "Train cars of toxic chemicals are parked right next to schools" in an African-American section of the city, he told *NCR*. "There'd be outrage if this was happening in a white area."

A polluted water system and contaminated creeks and tributaries of the Ohio mean that "Do not swim" signs dot several shorelines. Kentucky's reliance on cheap coal for its energy needs accounts for much of the air and water degradation, he said.

The priest hopes that through education and networking, the tour will create a template for other groups working to improve life in the city. Mitchell thought it might also link environmental advocates with bicycle clubs, food growers and outdoor enthusiasts.

Mitchell points to Berry as an inspiration. It is not a great leap for Passionists to move from the image of the suffering Christ, to that of his endangered creatures, to that of the wounded Earth itself, the priest said.

After directing the Passionist retreat center in Sacramento, Calif., for a decade and earning a graduate degree in philosophy, cosmology and consciousness from the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, Mitchell wanted to engage the relationship between the emerging scientific cosmology and Christian theology, and to study the role of humanity in the story of the Earth.

The 93-year-old red brick barn on the property of the Passionist community in the Highlands area of Louisville proved the perfect venue to house the Earth & Spirit Center, which began in 2005. The center's mission is to motivate, educate and enable religious institutions and peoples of all faiths to assume an active role in building a just and sustainable society.

Mitchell does not dwell on an "Earth in peril" scenario, but rather tries to "get people concerned and give them hope and the possibility of living in a healthy, beautiful and sustainable world."

Greening the campus

St. Peter's College in Jersey City, N.J., has made changes, notes Doug Demeo, a GreenFaith fellow who works as assistant director of campus ministry. The college has installed motion-sensor sinks in its bathrooms, switched to Energy Star appliances in residence halls and uses more "eco-friendly" cleaning products. It is also in the midst of a capital campaign committed to building a "green" student center.

Efforts to optimize roof space to install solar panels and to partner with the county to recycle most of the food waste in the dining services are still in the talking stage. "It's a process," Demeo said. "It needs to be a mission-oriented decision, not solely an economic one."

Even though St. Peter's is an urban campus, Demeo works to cultivate a sense of wonder of the outdoors in students. He has made trips with students to West Virginia, where they have enjoyed the scenic countryside and have been "profoundly jolted" by the ravages of mountaintop removal and the ensuing "hardships and heartaches felt by affected local communities."

The experience led to talks on sustainability with St. Peter's economics and business faculty and resulted in plans for a collaborative "Green Jobs Conference" in April. Demeo, a former Jesuit scholastic, hopes his GreenFaith preparation can help him to engage other campus leaders, not only at St. Peter's, but across the field of Jesuit higher education. He would like to get trustees at Catholic institutions to invest in socially responsible mutual funds and promote "an integrated faith and business-savvy consciousness" among those who handle Catholic portfolios for dioceses and universities.

Carbon footprint

Br. Kevin Cawley thinks the greatest hurdle in trying to find answers to the ecological crisis is to "get folks to take this issue seriously" without having their spirit crushed by the sheer scale of the global challenge.

Cawley is the coordinator for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation for the Edmund Rice Christian Brothers in North America and is based in New Rochelle, N.Y. He also represents the international congregation of 1,100 members at the United Nations and regularly attends U.N. briefings and interfaith meetings on the environment and climate change.

Like other GreenFaith fellows, Cawley is trying to reduce his carbon footprint. He eats less meat, uses his bicycle and public transit more and takes fewer car rides. He has cut down on flying and buys carbon offsets for the air travel that is still part of his work. Cawley has also reduced his water use, and has been more careful about his energy use, about recycling and about not wasting food. These are "small, but real shifts," he told *NCR*.

His job has taken him to more than 25 nations, where he has seen firsthand the plight of the developing world. "The poorer nations of Latin America, Africa and Asia have the right to develop and grow their economies and serve their populations," he said. But if they continue to strive for a Western standard of living, "the world will not be able to sustain the drive."

To ensure a level of social and economic justice, "the developed world must learn to do with less," Cawley said. "We must rid ourselves of addictions to fossil fuels, meat-centered diets and wasteful water and food practices."

The brother said he's delighted that his GreenFaith fellowship has forced him back to reading theology. It has helped him invigorate his thinking about these issues, he said, at a time when the explosion of information on the Internet "discloses vast new fields of data that can intimidate even the most diligent GreenFaith scholar."

At times Cawley's brain tells him to take a break, but "my heart tells me, what else do you have to do that is more important?" He pauses, contemplating his 11 nieces and nephews, and adds: "I need to feel that 20 years from now I will be able to look each of them in the eye and say, 'I tried to do my best and I want you to know I did it for you.'"

Patricia Lefevere is a regular contributor to NCR.

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GreenFaith

www.greenfaith.org

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