Chapter 3

Conducting an Environmental Assessment

A comprehensive environmental assessment provides the Green Sanctuary team with a snapshot in time, establishing where the congregation stands with respect to environmental impact. The assessment will examine the condition of your facilities, current management practices, and ongoing programs. You will also survey individual congregation members and active friends for their environmental awareness, current sustainable practices, and interest or willingness to participate in taking action related to specific issues.

In the process of becoming a Green Sanctuary, the congregation will look at everything from the management of your buildings and grounds to the elements in your worship and the contents of your educational programs. You’ll examine consumption patterns, spending habits, and social activities. And in most cases, you’ll find that patterns in one area have impacts in others that will require you to be thoughtful, cautious, and flexible while making the compromises dictated by your unique situation.

This exercise creates a baseline so you clearly see your progress in visible and measurable accomplishments. As you become familiar with all of these aspects of congregational life, you will see where you are already in good shape, and you will begin to identify gaps, problem areas, and opportunities for improvement. With this information, you can develop a list of recommendations for facility improvements and opportunities that will strengthen operations and insure your long-term sustainability. You will also identify program opportunities to deepen your relationship with the Earth and put your passion for justice to work for healing environmental damage for both human and non-human communities. The results of the assessment become a resource to you for developing the substance of your Green Sanctuary Action Plan described in Chapter 4.

The environmental assessment includes two completely different arenas: individual behaviors and practices and congregational programs, policies, and management practices. The purpose for each arena is different, and the practical approaches will vary. Even better, you will acknowledge the positive steps the congregation and individual members and friends have already taken, providing a psychological boost just when it seems there is so much to do.
**Personal Assessments**

Over the past two or three years, several Green Sanctuary congregations have developed survey tools for their members to calculate and report on their personal practices and behaviors which use natural resources and/or impact the condition of the land, air, and water. These surveys can have substantial benefits. First and most basic, simply taking the survey raises the level of awareness, sometimes motivating participants to action they might not otherwise take. For the Green Sanctuary Program, you will gain information about your members’ interests and willingness to participate and this, in turn, will suggest projects to include in your Action Plan. You will also learn how much your members are already doing, providing reasons to celebrate and giving you hope for the future.

If you design your own survey instrument, make sure the questions aren’t overwhelming, and that they are expressed positively rather than negatively. If you use one from another source, you will want to tailor it to your congregation, so feel free to adapt as seems appropriate. Keep in mind that it will be more difficult to get a good return on the survey if it is too complicated or takes too long to complete, or if its tone tends to make people feel guilty. We encourage you to keep it simple.

We also suggest that you repeat the survey when you have completed your Action Plan projects. This allows you to track changes in awareness, action, and long term commitments among your members. You’ll want to share the response with the congregation when you report your accomplishments and ask for a vote to apply for Green Sanctuary accreditation.

One example of this type of survey was created by the Green Sanctuary committee at Cedars UU Church on Bainbridge Island. Their survey uses “SurveyMonkey,” one of the on-line tools for creating and tracking responses to surveys. You can see the survey on our web site at http://uuministryforearth.org/files/CedarsUU_GSAudit.pdf. Their intention is to use the same survey the following year to show any changes as a result of Green Sanctuary activities implemented in the congregation.

Most surveys focus on an “environmental footprint” as a means of showing individual impact on the Earth’s resources. Carbon and other air emissions, water usage, food choices, dwelling type, and other elements of sustainability are usually included. Other surveys are more comprehensive and ask about the level of knowledge about environmental issues and current involvement in environmental action, in addition to posing life-style questions.

**Congregational Assessment**

The environmental assessment looks at church programs, policies, and management practices within the framework of the four focus areas. This is much more than just the physical building and grounds. You will look at worship and other spiritual practices, religious education programs, the justice work of your congregation, and day-to-day management
practices and policies, as well as building condition, landscape management, and day-to-day operations.

The Green Sanctuary committee takes the initiative for this task. Together the committee will decide specifically what issues, practices, and policies need to be evaluated and assign the various components to the team members to investigate. The contents of the assessment will depend on several circumstances: whether you own or control the building, whether you are the sole user or there are other tenants, how often the building is used during the week, how extensive your program offerings are, whether you are lay led or have a professional minister, and whether you have staff to manage programs and operations. In cases where you don’t have control over the building, obviously your ability to change management practices may be limited. However, some congregations have found that landlords can be willing to collaborate and changes can be made, so don’t just assume you are powerless.

There are several levels of investigation you may use, depending on the issues and specific questions, and your particular situation:

- **“Walk about”—**simply walk around the building and look at what is happening. Are lights usually turned off? Are people using the recycle bins? Can you smell the residue of cleaning products? Are the computers and printers turned off at the end of the day?

- Interview staff and/or committee leaders to find out about their programs and practices. What programs have been offered in the last couple of years? What policies are in place that guide specific practices, and how well are they implemented? Who carries out the various program, management, and operational tasks (landscape care, janitorial services, office work, etc.) and how are decisions made about how these jobs are done?

- Request relevant reports from those responsible, including staff and committee members.

- Review available documents (bylaws, annual reports, policy directives, etc.).

The actual assessment process will vary considerably among different congregations. Size matters, as do the skills and perspectives of the team members. Large congregations will have several staff members who need to be involved in this process. Some may be entirely supportive of the Green Sanctuary goals, while others may not see why you consider it so important. A larger congregation may also have contractors, such as janitorial or landscaping services, who may or may not be willing to spend time with you explaining how they go about their work. These larger congregations will also be likely to have more formalized procedures and documentation practices, possibly making your job easier because the data is more likely to be available in standard formats.

Teams in smaller congregations may be on their own when trying to gather all this data, digging through records in storage boxes or trying to find the name of the committee mem-
ber who was in charge of a relevant project several years ago. You may have less bureaucracy than larger churches, but you may also be less consistent with practices and have fewer relevant policies to fall back on. Just find out what you can and decide to start fresh where information is unavailable. That may give you a blank slate when looking at what policies or new practices are needed.

Board commitment to the Green Sanctuary Program will help back up your requests for staff or contractor support, but you must also remember that they have other job responsibilities and may see your requests as interfering with their other demands. If your church is short-staffed, remember that your timetable may not be their top priority, and always express your respect and appreciation for their contribution. It is important to maintain positive relationships, especially as this process implies there will be changes.

Communication skills, analytical practice, ability (even willingness) to document, are all important capabilities that don’t require specific technical expertise. By applying these skills to the task, any of the team members should be able to review by-laws and policy documents, evaluate programs, and check out toxic cleaning supplies.

**Areas of Consideration for Environmental Assessment**

As we have said, the environmental assessment examines the status of church facilities, management practices, church policies, and the substance of ongoing church programs. This section is arranged by the four focus areas to identify most of the topics you will examine. Here we suggest a number of specific questions you will want to ask to document your current situation. These questions will reveal gaps, problem areas, and opportunities that you may wish to include in your Action Plan. The answers will also provide the base against which to measure your progress and demonstrate accomplishment of the program goals for your program evaluation.

Understand that this section is not a checklist, but is intended to trigger your thinking. Not every item here will necessarily be relevant in every congregation, and there may be other elements that are important to you that we have left out. If you try to gather details on every question listed here, you could be at the assessment for a year, instead of trying to get on with the program. That is not the intention! Be discriminating, and spend your time and resources where it matters most.
Some people or groups are “lumpers” and others are “splitters.” It will be your call to determine what should be combined or where you want to break it out even further to provide more detail. That will depend somewhat on which topics are calling you to a response and on what information you will need for future planning. You’ll also realize that if you don’t collect some piece of information the first time around, you can always go back to get it later if the need arises.

Often the question that comes up is about how far back to look. Generally, you don’t need to look back beyond two or three years at program patterns and building management. If a practice has been in place for three years, it’s safe to say that’s an on-going practice. But if a major event happened four or five years ago (a new minister with very different views on the environment, for example, or occupancy of a new building), you might want to explain what happened to give your assessment more context.

Be aware, also that the Green Sanctuary review team will look at your application with a stranger’s eye. The team requires some analysis for each of the four focus areas. We also expect to see a summary of your energy audit (not the entire document) or an explanation of why it was left out.

Not all of these questions for each focus area will be relevant for every congregation, and there may be additional issues you will consider. The objective for this process is to begin looking as broadly as possible and subsequently narrow your assessment to address targeted issues as you learn more about your situation.

**Worship and Other Spiritual Practices**

• How is environmental awareness and Earth wisdom integrated into Sunday worship? This might include sermon topics, music, readings and meditations, etc.

• What other worship or spiritual practices have been used to integrate Earth wisdom and help deepen your connections with each other and with this precious planet? This might be a weekly or monthly eco-spirituality vespers service or seasonal rituals. A covenant group with a deep ecology theme might also be included here.

• Do you conduct alternative and seasonal worship programs, such as solstice and equinox celebrations?

**Religious Education and Lifespan Learning**

• What age-appropriate lessons and activities are used to help children understand their place in nature?

• What adult programs and classes are offered to explore environmental themes and related faith issues? These may include on-going classes, special lectures and panel discussions, film festivals, field trips, book discussions, and many other programs that appeal to different learning styles.
• Have you offered intergenerational learning experiences that encourage children and adults to learn these lessons from each other? More likely these may be one-time events and celebrations, or short-term projects designed to keep the children’s interest; examples might include creating a butterfly garden or learning about where the trash goes.

**Justice for All Beings on Earth**

• What specific justice issues are the focus of social action programs in your congregation? Are environmental issues among the list?

• How do congregational programs, activities and operations impact people or communities of color or other disadvantaged groups in your locality? Do local community groups use your facilities for programs that serve these communities?

• What major environmental issues in your local community affect disadvantaged groups or communities of color? This might include a proposal for highway construction or a new power plant, or the on-going operation of an industrial facility. It might be inadequate infrastructure in a low-income community that never seems to get official attention, or perhaps lack of access to healthy and organic foods in an inner city neighborhood. Awareness of community issues will open up opportunities for collaboration with local groups to work on an important justice issue.

• Are there possibilities for programs or activities that could mitigate environmental injustice for communities suffering oppressions of racism, poverty, or other social problems (for example land use and development impacts, health effects of pollution, denial of access to resources including water, healthy food, energy conservation technologies, etc.)?

• How does the congregation’s site relate to habitat for non-human species? Is there space to create a habitat garden? Are you located near a wildlife refuge? Have you undertaken projects to protect or restore natural resources and habitats?

**Congregational Interests and Commitments**

• Are there interests, concerns, and opportunities within the congregation that offer potential for environmental education and action, whether or not they have a readily apparent environmental connection? For example, is there a long standing so-
cial justice program to address affordable housing, prison ministry, early childhood education, or farm worker rights? For any of these programs, you may find related environmental issues that the congregation would be excited to work on.

- What skills and experiences of congregation members might contribute to furthering environmental commitments? An investment counselor may be willing to help review management of your endowment fund. Local teachers or college professors may have specific expertise on environmental issues or curriculum development. An energy specialist can help you find out how to conduct your energy audit, or someone who is an active member of an outdoor club may be interested in putting together a course for learning about your local bioregion.

- What community resources and potential partners are already organized to address local environmental issues (activist congregations, secular environmental groups, political action groups, etc.)?

**Energy Use and Management**

If you own your own building, in most cases we recommend that you obtain a professional energy audit. This is the only element of the environmental assessment that specifically requires technical expertise. A very few congregations have this expertise on their planning teams, but most should be able to access it. We find, however, that this step is frequently overlooked in the assessment documentation.

- The energy audit will look at the building condition with respect to energy efficiency of equipment (heating, cooling, plumbing, etc.), heat loss potential (insulation, windows), systems management (programmable thermostats), lighting fixtures (exit signs, light bulbs, motion sensors), energy efficiency ratings of appliances, and the like. With all of this information, the auditor will calculate current energy waste and recommend improvements. Recommendations are usually made as high, medium, and low priority, depending on the amount of energy savings, the size of investment required, and the amount and speed of return on your investment.

- Five years ago, the energy audit presented a financial barrier for many congregations, but that should no longer be the case. As energy costs have increased, the return on investment has improved considerably. Your audit will provide recommendations that will almost always result within a very few years in more savings than the cost of the audit.

- If energy or environmental engineering expertise is not available within your congregation, you will need to contract for it. In many states, there are local resources for low-cost or subsidized contractors. In some places, you may even qualify for a free audit. There are some areas where energy contractors (for example, those who install heating and air conditioning systems) will conduct an audit, and arrange for payment over time out of the savings from implementing the recommendations. So research all the options in your area before you give up and decide you can’t do it.
There are a few situations where an energy audit is not necessary or not practical.

- If you have already completed a professional audit within the last three years or so, you do not need to repeat the process at this time. Just include the summary and recommendations from that audit, along with a brief report on implementation of recommendations.

- If you have a fairly new building (occupancy within the last five years), and the building was designed with energy conservation in mind, then an audit probably isn’t necessary. You will probably have the documentation from the building design available. A review of your energy usage for the last two years may be sufficient, unless that review reveals anomalies that concern you.

- If you own your building but use it only once or twice a week, major capital investments are not likely to be cost effective, even though they may save some energy. In this case, basic low-cost steps can be taken without going through a complete audit. These steps can include upgrading inefficient appliances, replacing exit signs with LED technology and replacing some other light fixtures with more efficient models, switching to compact fluorescent bulbs as old bulbs burn out, and adding weather stripping around windows and doors.

- If you don’t own your building, but rent or lease space from a landlord, it may not be possible to conduct a formal audit. You should attempt to work with your landlord if he/she is willing. You might negotiate a cost-share for the audit or do the homework to find a low-cost resource for this step. To encourage their willingness to do an audit, you might offer to implement one or more of the recommendations. (Note: this does not mean you don’t have to do an energy conservation project; there are many ways besides building improvements to save energy.)

For all other cases, if this requirement has you stumped, check with the Green Sanctuary coordinator. We may be able to help you find the resources you need.

With or without a professional energy audit, you will want review your patterns of energy consumption over the last three to five years. Your utility bills should show usage with clear seasonal patterns. Make sure you’re looking at usage, not cost figures don’t necessarily reflect usage, since the price can fluctuate widely. In this exercise you are looking for anomalies that could indicate waste or heat leakage. It also gives you a baseline for evaluating possible capital investment opportunities for conservation.

With the consumption patterns clarified, you’ll next want to review behaviors that could impact consumption, such as leaving lights on in empty rooms or leaving the furnace on high when the building is not in use. These will become targets for a campaign to change habits that may eventually be supplemented by any capital improvements. There is no point in making large investments when individual behaviors are wasteful.
**Water Resources**

- What is your source for domestic water (ground water, well, river, reservoir)?

- What are your water consumption patterns (taken from water bills)? Do you water the landscape? Do you have water saving devices (low flow toilets, faucet restrictors)?

- Do you know the status of your water quality? What are the potential challenges to your local water supply (e.g., aging infrastructure, fire risk to the local watershed, agricultural chemical contaminants, or other issues)? Are there threats to free and open access to good quality water?

**Facilities Condition, Management and Operations**

- What is the source of your energy? Is it sustainable? Do you purchase renewable energy for all or a portion of your use?

- What local recycling procedures are available for businesses and churches? How do you handle the recycling for your congregation? Do you have established policies or is this just a “nice thing to do”? Do you depend on volunteers or is this a staff function? What is your level of compliance with the opportunity for recycling? If you run a kitchen, do you compost kitchen waste?

- How is your building cleaned (volunteer function, paid staff, or service contract)? If you have a contract, are requirements spelled out for non-toxic cleaning supplies?

- What is your current practice regarding supplies for operations (kitchen and bathroom supplies, food service products like paper plates and napkins, office products like copy paper and printer cartridges, cleaning products, etc.)? Do you have policies for purchasing recycled content supplies, non-toxic cleaning products, and materials from sustainable sources?

- What practices and policies are in place regarding investment decisions (i.e., socially and environmentally responsible criteria)?

*Bike to church for Clean Air Sunday. UU Church of Davis, California*
• How do you care for your land and gardens? What are your practices and policies for landscape management (use of native species, landscape chemicals, etc)?

• How do your members get to church on Sundays and for weekday events? Is public transportation available or is it practical to walk or bicycle? Is there a carpool system in place?

• What is your congregation’s awareness and practice regarding sustainable food (local, low on the food chain, chemical free, etc.) for community events? Are vegetarian and vegan options made available as a regular practice? Do you use fair trade coffee/tea and other products?

**Assessment Format**

You will want to retain the detailed findings of your audit as a baseline for starting your Action Plan and to become a permanent part of your files. You will also want to periodically update your findings to track changes and decide on future actions as well. However, the full documentation is not necessary for your Green Sanctuary Candidacy application. You need only include a summary of the key findings (both positive and opportunities for improvement) and a list of recommendations for possible responses. This narrative and/or listing should be about 3 to 5 pages in length, depending on the size of your congregation and the complexity of your situation. You will find examples of acceptable formats for the assessment summary in Exhibit B suggesting the level of detail expected for your application for candidacy.