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About

Indiana

God, Climate and Word Choice

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An interfaith collective is making congregations around Indiana more green – without saying the words climate change or global warming.



Solar panels line the roof of Downey Avenue Christian Church in Indianapolis.



The coal-colored roof slopes toward the manicured grassy ground. The roof is lined with 36 solar panels all facing the sun, soaking in its rays of light and converting it into renewable energy.

Above it all, towers a sun-stained spire topped with a cross.

clean energy. The movement, called the Seventh Day Initiative, helps congregations “clean up” their energy usage, and is the brainchild of Madeline “Madi” Hirschland, a 58-year-old force of nature on a mission to lower Indiana’s carbon emissions.

The initiative provides grants for congregations to install solar panels and invites individual congregants to trim energy usage in their own homes. Each congregation is then challenged to cut its total energy usage – both individual and communal – by 33 percent.

Solar energy does not produce air or water pollutants and does not emit greenhouse gases, which make it a cleaner form of energy. A pastor in Fort Wayne, Brian Flory, refers to the **right of congregations to use solar energy** as the right to “generate electricity from God’s free sunshine.”

In 2014, Hirschland helped 13 congregations receive solar grants, which assisted in their successfully cutting down their energy emissions by 33 percent in under two years. Soon thereafter, the 13 congregations grew to 31 and more are looking to join the movement.

and solar grants from a combination of the Indiana Office of Energy Development and a legal settlement among Indiana Michigan Power and several parties, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, eight states, and 13 citizen groups. Similar programs have flourished across the country under a national organization called **Interfaith Power and Light**, which estimates there are 1,000 solar-powered congregations nationally, according to Susan Stephenson, the organization's executive director.

Hirschland, a practicing Jew living in Bloomington, co-founded Hoosier Interfaith Power and Light, and began the initiative under its umbrella. The Seventh Day Initiative and the organization out of which it grew are sharing resources and a vision to create a more environmentally conscious broader faith community by getting people to act in ways that will not further harm the planet. The energy reductions in congregations associated with the initiative were due to a coupling of the solar panels and the communities becoming mindful of conservation. The Seventh Day Initiative also seeks to enable productive conversation about climate change with groups that would not otherwise engage – like the state's large evangelical population.

Public opinion in Indiana provides unique circumstances for this. Just 64 percent of Indianans, six points less than the national average, believe climate change is happening, according to a [2016 Yale Program on Climate Change Communications survey](#). Sixty four percent do not believe climate change will impact future generations.

To some who live in less religious states or are unaffiliated with faith, this discussion may appear obsolete or even silly. But in Indiana, the 22nd most religious state where 54 percent of adults report themselves as highly religious, according to a [2016 Pew Research study](#), this discussion is anything but. Moreover, 31 percent of Indiana residents identify as evangelical Christians, a denomination with a [high rate](#) of climate change denial.

It is perhaps surprising then that residents with such high climate change disbelief, and particularly those affiliated with congregations, would opt into a solar energy program, which for all intents and purposes is a mindful assault on climate change.

And yet, it's happening.

CREATION CARE, NOT CLIMATE CHANGE

While the words “climate change” can be politically divisive, “creation care” is not. Creation care – or the care for all of God’s creations: humans, animals, and the planet bestowed upon humans by the divine power – is being used by clergy to enable conversation about the earth and climate. As a [Yale Climate Connections study](#) indicates, “Stewardship and care for the earth have universal appeal.” The term creation care appears on many congregations’ [websites](#) in Indiana and around the country.

Pastor Trey Flowers of the Downey Avenue Christian Church in Indianapolis, a [Disciples of Christ congregation](#), said his church has an active creation care team. The church, which offers yoga courses, is a Green Chalice congregation.

The Green Chalice program was started by the Disciples of Christ and helps congregations “live out their faith by caring for creation,” according to its charter. Downey Avenue Christian Church was one of the first participants in Hoosier Interfaith Power and Light’s solar program. Solar panels currently provide 15 percent of the congregation’s energy, Flowers said.

For those who may not agree that combating climate change is divine work, there are other motivations to participate in solar programs. Some congregations are not motivated by saving the earth. “For us as people of faith, if we can cut our energy costs then we can have more money for mission,” the organized effort to spread Christianity, said the Rev. Wyatt Watkins, spiritual leader of Cumberland First Baptist Church.

Vic Myers, head of the energy task force at Kern Road Mennonite Church in South Bend, said congregations cannot be painted with broad strokes. While a church may be more liberal, many members might be more conservative. Sermons and community events at Kern Road Mennonite Church, which cut its energy usage 25 percent within a year of joining Hoosier Interfaith Power and Light's initiative, try to frame energy conservation in terms of creation care, Myers said, because "our faith is a motivator for taking these actions."

you run the complete spectrum of political opinions in my congregation.” While his church is evangelical, it defies stereotypes and shatters preconceived notions: “There’s a misconception that evangelicals are a monolithic bloc. ... It’s far more diverse than people know it to be. If my congregation is anything like a microcosm, that’s certainly true.”

Nearly all evangelicals — **88 percent, according to the Pew Research Center on Religion & Public Life** — believe in miracles, suggesting a faith in a proactive God. Only **28 percent of evangelicals** nationwide believe human activity is causing climate change. Confidence that God will intervene to prevent people from destroying the world is one of the strongest barriers to gaining conservative evangelical support for environmental pacts like the Paris agreement, **the Washington Post reported**.

That said, Whitaker noted there is a growing faction of evangelicals passionate about environmental issues. Organizations like the **Evangelical Environmental Network**, which focuses on how environmental concerns and evangelical theology fit, confirm that.

Whitaker’s congregation had not yet had a community-wide discussion about its association with the larger creation care movement when he spoke to weather.com, but he said that adding solar panels to the church has become a part of the community discourse.

Joe Bowling, son of the Rev. Michael Bowling of Englewood’s Christian Church and co-director of its community development corporation, explained how the Christian conservative-aligned congregation made the shift to solar three years ago.

“We made a commitment that a third of our congregation would cut down on energy, and the majority of the congregation has done it.” The community is an outlier, Bowling said. It’s a Christian church that’s evangelical by tradition in an urban setting, which “makes us less familiar to other evangelicals,” he said.

“From our own tradition, there’s more skepticism over climate change,” he said. “Creation care gives us common ground.”

AN ALREADY CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

Climate change has already affected Indiana.

Most of the state has warmed about one degree Fahrenheit in the last century, a number that already has had implications statewide, according to the EPA.

Warmer temperatures cause ice and snow to melt earlier in spring, which impacts the Great Lakes, a source of water for Hoosiers. The shifts affect water levels at different times of the year, leading to less habitat for coldwater fish, according to the National Wildlife Federation.

Extreme weather due to these climate shifts has already cost the state \$6 billion in the last five years, [according to data from Indiana University](#). Milder winters have contributed to a 430 percent increase in documented cases of Lyme disease this century.

A projected four-degree increase in temperatures across the state by 2050 would threaten corn and soybean production, two major state crops.

And the state isn't helping itself.

Most electricity in Indiana – home state of Vice President Mike Pence, who was governor from 2013 to 2017 – comes from coal-powered plants, a source of energy that [science has proven](#) has negative environmental impacts. Six percent comes from renewable energy as of 2016, according to the U.S.'s Energy Information Administration Electric Power Monthly.

In May, Gov. Eric Holcomb signed a bill that gradually lowers the reimbursement for Hoosier grantees who install devices to use renewable energy, like solar or wind power.

In February, **Indiana successfully passed a Senate resolution** in favor of teachers who “choose to teach a diverse curriculum,” giving climate denial the opportunity to enter the classroom.

Some residents see catastrophic potential in these decisions.

In May, Indiana University launched a \$55 million effort to study the impact of climate change, which could have a profound impact on agriculture, industry and quality of life in the state in the coming decades. As the Associated Press noted, “University officials, including President Michael McRobbie, largely avoided politically charged terms like ‘climate change’ or ‘global warming’ during a ceremony at the Indiana State Museum. But they said make no mistake: environmental changes that are already afoot need to be researched in order to prepare for the negative consequences of a warmer globe.”

"IT'S ABOUT WHAT THEY HEAR"

In Indiana, only 49 percent of people believe climate change is human-caused, according to a [2016 Yale Program on Climate Change Communications survey](#). This discrepancy could create barriers when climate change advocates try to engage others on the topic.

partly why the Seventh Day Initiative separated from Hoosier Interfaith Power and Light, which focuses on advocacy work.

Hirschland and a group of volunteers met last month with evangelical clergy to discuss collaborating on creation care. A clergy member assured her his congregation cares about God's creations, to which the group responded, "If you care, why isn't there more of a voice on these issues?"

Both the clergy member and Hirschland recall the same response: "We would agree with you on the demand to care for God's creation and to care for our neighbors, but you shouldn't necessarily assume that that's going to translate to policy work, though it may be transferred to personal belief and actions."

That was enlightening to Hirschland. "I think that that's where there can be a divide. The fact that we all agree on the issue doesn't mean we all agree on what should be done about it," she said. "We may ultimately agree on what to be done about it, but that's not a starting point."

Hirschland and her team have fine-tuned their communication methods in a spirit mirroring that of conservative pundit and pollster Frank Luntz: "It's not about what you say, it's about what they hear."

Ron Halbright, an internationally renowned conflict resolution specialist based in Switzerland, said that often when engaging in a conversation that involves long-standing, polarizing social conflict, “it is useful to seek a language that furthers communication and avoid polarizing language like blaming, ‘always,’ ‘never,’ generalizations, hyperbole, etc.”

While some might call this disingenuous or compromising their own personal beliefs, Halbright, who is the Co-Executive Director at NCBI Switzerland, an interfaith and intercultural dialogue organization, would argue it “enables conversation.”

Speaking at a fundraiser in New York City on May 8, former Sen. Joe Lieberman, a Democrat, echoed these sentiments in talking about his own religious identity. While he’s labeled an Orthodox Jew, he identifies as “religiously observant,” he explained. “That way it doesn’t push anyone away,” he said, noting that calling himself by any other label could make others feel distant and create unnecessary division, both among people of his own faith and among people of other faiths or what the Pew Research Center studies call “religious nones.”

This is why Hirschland and others working in the field don’t mention climate change when discussing solar energy and green living. They use non-threatening language, which people are more inclined to hear. By using the faith language of creation care, they find common ground on which to begin.

WHAT DOES DOMINION MEAN?

The concept of creation care is based on biblical verses that establish the precedence of divinely bestowed interconnectedness between humans, habitat and all beings on earth. This connection, coupled with the fact that God created the world, is the basis for the idea of stewardship – that humans must look after the earth and its inhabitants. These values, highlighted in the Old and New Testaments, hold religious significance for the three Abrahamic faiths: Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

Creation care’s foundations are derived from the creation accounts in Genesis, said John Grim, senior lecturer and senior research scholar at Yale’s Divinity School and School of Forestry & Environmental Studies. Verses in Genesis proclaim God as the creator of the world: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” and declare God’s creation good: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”

the earth. The language in the biblical text bolsters this.

Crediting insight to biblical scholar William Brown, Grim noted that Adam could be translated from the original biblical Hebrew not as human, but as groundling, or a being of the ground. “In the second creation account, both the Christian and Jewish scholars explore *Adam* and the ground out of which he is created, (which in Biblical Hebrew is called) *adama*,” Grim explained. In the text, Adam was created from the ground, the *adama*. Because of the shared linguistic root of *Adam* and *adama*, “maybe a way to think of Adam and Eve is as groundlings and not as humans,” Grim said.

The creation story is by no means the only supporting text for creation care and stewardship.

In the story of Noah’s ark, the text reads: “And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you,” a verse which can be read to say that humans have a responsibility to all living things.

In Psalm 115, an Old Testament book of lyrical poetry and praise, the psalmist writes, “The sky are the heavens for Lord, but the earth He gave to the children of Adam.”

addressing the laws the Israelites received before entering biblical Israel. “

“You shall not pollute the land in which you live. ... You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell,” God is recorded as having instructed, as is recounted in a text in Numbers.

The New Testament furthers these notions, like in Colossians 1, which says: “Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.”

However, as with any text, the multitude of interpretive possibilities makes extrapolating truth a tricky endeavor.

Theologians discuss the meaning of the text in Genesis that says God granted human beings “dominion over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, the cattle, and all the earth, and over every creeping things that creep upon the earth.”

Does this passage — which Christian theologians terms the dominion mandate — mean that people can do no environmental harm? “That’s a major point of controversy,” Grim said. Some interpret it as such, as Grim explained, especially because in other passages God implies that certain earthly systems like rain and fertile land are dependent on sin and righteousness. Others interpret this as a divine responsibility bestowed on humans to watch over the whole earth.

“They would both see a divine reality — that creation is in relationship to the divine,” Grim said, which in turn creates common ground between those who hold these two seemingly opposing interpretations. But again, what’s at stake is the definition of dominion: Is it stewardship? Governance? A lease?

But this isn’t the only hiccup. The question of how eschatology plays into the idea of creation care is a vital piece of this conversation.

As Pastor Flowers of Downey Avenue Christian Church puts it, “There’s a gap in theology and the way we understand caring for the earth.”

matter?”

Similarly, the Rev. Watkins, board chair of Hoosier Interfaith Power and Light, explained “there are about 10-15 percent of Christians who believe in a rapture – that we’ll get a new heaven and a new earth ... But that’s not how most people believe.”

The rapture is an eschatological belief that at the end of time, all true believers in the Trinity will be beamed up to join the Divine in the sky during a time of great tribulation in which there will be severe war, famine and affliction. Some believe that after the period of tribulation ends, the raptured souls will be returned to a divinely restored earth.

The term rapture serves to distinguish this event from the belief in a second coming of Jesus Christ to earth, which some believe is preordained in the New Testament. Theology holds that in the second coming, Jesus will return to the earth to rule and “his kingdom will have no end,” as is referred to in a foundational testament of Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and most Protestant churches belief called the Nicene Creed. Some use this doctrine to justify a belief that the earth cannot be destroyed because it would undermine this theological principle of the second coming.

While not many Americans are reported to believe in a rapture, according to [a 2010 Pew Research Center study](#), 41 percent of Americans believe that Jesus Christ will return to redeem humanity within the next 40 years, meaning they believe in some form of a second coming.

The Rev. Dr. William Barber, recently [the subject of a New York Times’ cover story](#) on the rise of the religious left, believes there is [a moral responsibility to fight climate change](#).

The Bible uses the same word for “keeping” the earth as for “keeping” God’s law. Climate change is a moral issue. [#climatemarch](#)
[#MoralAgenda](#)

— Rev. Dr. Barber (@RevDrBarber) [April 29, 2017](#)

As the Times noted, Barber calls himself an evangelical “who takes seriously the Old Testament and Jesus.” Yet he has fully embraced what are perceived as liberal

“The Bible,” he notes, “says far more about caring for the needy than it does about homosexuality or abortion.”

In 2015, Pope Francis, leader of the world’s 1.2 billion Roman Catholics, issued an encyclical entitled **Laudato Si** in which he argues the theological basis for creation care. In it, he asserts that social justice and eco-justice cannot be separated. He writes, there is “an intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet.”

He cites that warming is already impacting poorer areas globally and leading to premature death, and how only poor quality water is available to the poor because of environmental disregard. Climate change, he writes, is already affecting the world’s poorest. So even if there is hesitancy or apathy in a Christian’s heart regarding the environment, there is a responsibility to care for the poor and the downtrodden. Therefore, it is a religious and moral imperative to care for creation.

Polls **indicate** that while a majority of American Christians view climate change as real, fewer than a third of them understand that poor people are already being harmed by it, as copiously illustrated by scientific research and what some would call this divine encyclical.

POTENTIAL FOR WIDESPREAD IMPACT

Pastor Flowers believes that faith communities are a powerful place to start with energy efficiency and conservation work in order to have a widespread impact.

“If we’ve got all the folks in our church making changes and talking about them,” he said, and “if everyone were doing things like that in their communities, the communities of faith can have a massive impact.”

He explained it would be a snowball effect, as people would speak to each other about it and realize how easy and beneficial it is for the individual and for the collective.

“When my congregation first did it,” Hirschland said of the solar panels and cutting congregation energy usage, “it was considered impossible.” She hopes the faithful

In the eyes of those involved, it is not only possible, but a moral imperative.

“Creation care is something that truly cuts across nationalities race religion gender,” Flowers said. “What happens to the environment impacts every single one of us.”

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