



Green Sanctuary Program

Stage 2 Action Steps: Suggested
Questions for Congregational
Assessment



These sample questions can help you understand your congregation's current environmental practices, and encourage further reflection. Think of them as a guideline - you may encounter issues not listed here, or find you need more specificity in some areas.

The objective is to begin thinking as broadly as possible, eventually targeting specific issues as you learn. In each area, consider including appreciative inquiry questions.

Not every item will be relevant to your congregation. Be selective, spending time and resources where it matters most. If you miss some information the first time around, you can always get it later.

Remember, too, that the purpose of the assessment is to document where you are right now so you can plan how to move forward. Focus on what your congregation is actually doing, not what you've talked about, or think you "should" do. Don't worry about whether your current practices are "good enough." No matter where you are starting from, the Green Sanctuary program will give your congregation the opportunity to grow.

Worship and Celebration

Your congregation's ministerial and worship committee can help you answer these questions.

You can also examine printed materials from recent services.

- How are environmental awareness and Earth wisdom integrated into Sunday worship? (Consider sermon topics, music, readings, meditations, and so on.)
- What alternative and seasonal worship programs - such as solstice and equinox celebrations - does your congregation regularly provide?
- What other worship or spiritual practices have been used to deepen your connections with "the interdependent web of all existence"? (Examples: weekly or monthly eco-spirituality vespers, or a covenant group with a deep ecology theme.)

Religious Education

Your Director of Religious Education (DRE) can help you frame these questions. Also consider talking with participants in religious education programs.

- What age-appropriate lessons and activities are used to help children understand their place in nature and the interconnectedness of all life?
- In what ways does your religious education programming help children learn how caring for the Earth relates to our Unitarian Universalist faith?
- What adult programs and classes are offered to explore environmental themes and related faith issues? (Examples may include: ongoing or one-time classes, special lectures and panel discussions, film festivals, field trips, book discussions, and other programs that appeal to different learning styles.)

- Has your congregation offered intergenerational learning experiences that encourage children and adults to learn these lessons from each other? If so, what themes and activities did they include?

Environmental Justice

Our Unitarian Universalist faith recognizes that environmental issues are not only matters of spirituality, but of justice. Our faith calls us to support the ecological health of human communities - especially disadvantaged, oppressed, and indigenous ones - as we strive to protect natural systems and nonhuman communities.

Some questions relate to recent and ongoing environmental justice activities. Others are designed to assess local issues, resources, and relationships that might inspire environmental justice projects for your Green Sanctuary action plan.

- Among the social action programs in your congregation, which include an environmental justice component?
 - Have you undertaken a project to protect or restore natural resources and habitats?
 - Have you organized a campaign to raise awareness about an environmental issue impacting a disadvantaged neighborhood?
- How does the congregation's physical location relate to habitat for nonhuman species?
 - Is there space to create a habitat garden?
 - Are you located near a wildlife refuge?
- How do your congregational programs, activities, and operations impact disadvantaged, oppressed, and indigenous communities in your area? Do community groups use your facilities to serve these communities?
- What environmental issues in your area affect disadvantaged, oppressed, and indigenous communities? What opportunities exist for local collaborations to work on these issues?
- What other possibilities exist for programs or activities that could mitigate environmental injustice in your community?

Sustainable Living

This focus area looks at the day-to-day practices affecting your congregation's use and management of natural resources. Areas to investigate include: energy use, water use, facilities

management, transportation, and financial management. As before, some questions are designed to suggest issues or resources for possible projects.

Energy Use and Management

- What is the source of your energy? Is it sustainable? Do you purchase renewable energy for all or a portion of your use?
- What are your energy consumption patterns?
- Review utility bills from the last three to five years. Make sure you're looking at usage, not cost figures, since price can fluctuate widely.
- What practices and habits affect your energy consumption?
- Are lights turned off in empty rooms?
- Are thermostats adjusted when the building is not in use?
- Are computers and printers turned off at the end of the day?

Water Use and Management

- What is your source for domestic water? (Groundwater, well, river, reservoir...)
- What are your water consumption patterns? (Review the water bills.)
- What practices affect your water usage? (Do you water the landscape? Do you have low-flow toilets and faucet restrictors?)
- Do you know the status of your water quality? What are the potential challenges to your local water supply? Are there threats to free and open access to good quality water?
- Related factors: aging infrastructure, fire risk to the local watershed, agricultural chemical contaminants.

Facilities Management

- How is your building cleaned (volunteers, paid staff, service contract)? If you have a contract, are there specific requirements for nontoxic cleaning supplies?
- What is your current practice regarding operations supplies? Do you have policies for purchasing items with recycled content, nontoxic cleansers, and materials from sustainable sources?
- Supplies could include: kitchen and bathroom supplies, food service products (paper plates, napkins), office products (copy paper, print cartridges), cleaning products.
- What is your congregation's awareness and practice regarding sustainable food? Are vegetarian or vegan options regularly made available? Do you use fair trade coffee/tea and other products?
- Examples of sustainable food: locally grown, low on the food chain, organic.

- What are the local recycling procedures? How do you handle recycling for your congregation?
- Is there an established recycling policy?
- Do you depend on volunteers or staff?
- What is your level of compliance compared to the opportunity for recycling?
- Do you compost kitchen waste?
- How do you care for your land and gardens? What are your practices and policies for landscape management?
- Do you include native species?
- Do you minimize landscaping chemicals?

Transportation

- How do your congregants get to Sunday services and weekday events?
- What forms of public transportation (if any) are available? How convenient are the routes and schedules for getting to and from your services and other events?
- Is it practical to walk or bicycle to your location? Are sidewalks, bike paths, or bike lanes provided? Are they in good condition and well lit?
- Do you provide bike racks or other facilities for securely storing bicycles?
- Is there a carpool system in place? How does it work? How many people use it?

Financial Management

- Are socially and environmentally responsible criteria part of the congregation's practices and policies regarding investment decisions?

Congregational and Community Involvement

In addition to examining the four focus areas, take some time to consider the following questions. Take stock of any resources that might help you choose, plan, and carry out Green Sanctuary projects.

- What existing committees and groups could work in partnership with the Green Sanctuary team? What expertise do their members have to offer?
- What interests, concerns, and opportunities offer potential for environmental education and action, whether or not they have a readily apparent environmental connection? Social justice programs concerning affordable housing, prison ministry, early childhood education, or farm workers rights could have related environmental issues the congregation would be excited to work on.
- What skills and experiences might contribute to furthering environmental commitments? Think creatively!

- An investment counselor may be willing to help review endowment fund management.
- Local teachers or college professors may have expertise in environmental issues or curriculum development.
- An energy specialist can help you find out how to conduct your energy audit.
- An active member of an outdoor club may be interested in putting together a course for learning about your local bioregion.
- What local activist congregations, secular environmental groups, and/or political action groups work on environmental issues? Which are potential partners?