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ENVIRONMENT

## Saving the world — an article of eco-faith

*For some Christians, it's not a matter of politics*

By Peggy Fletcher Stack  
The Salt Lake Tribune

Would Jesus have gorged himself this Thanksgiving on turkeys laced with sodium, kept the stove on all day, served imported pears or filled his garbage with plastic bags?

Christian environmentalists don't think so and, for them, it's more a matter of faith than politics.

The Earth is holy, these believers say, and God gave humanity the responsibility to protect and care for it. If we truly recognized the debt we owe to Mother Nature, we would stop overeating, overconsuming and overextending the world's resources.

"We don't think about the ethical implications of what we eat and what we buy," says Mormon environmental activist and Brigham Young University humanities professor George Handley. "LDS scriptures are replete with passages about the danger of 'wasting flesh' and exploiting nature, as well as the importance of distributing resources equitably."

And it's not just a Mormon problem, he says. "It affects the whole developed world."

Indeed, scores of religious believers in Utah, across the country and throughout the world share Handley's concerns, building their cases on religious texts, moral reasoning and church teachings.



"I realized global warming was happening and I needed to do something about it," said Dave Folland, a member of Citizens Climate Lobby.

Dozens of congregations are members of Utah Interfaith Power & Light, whose mission is to "seek to be faithful stewards of creation by addressing global climate change through the promotion of energy conservation and efficiency and a shift toward renewable energy."

Protecting the environment is an issue that every person — regardless of political party, religion, social standing or economic background — should care about, Handley says, but it has become entangled in politics.

These religious activists hope to transcend that wrangling, he adds, and wrap the conversation in the language of stewardship.

It is, he argues, a spiritual mandate.

### **Evolving awareness**

While teaching for three years at Northern Arizona University in the mid-

1990s, Handley was in a department that merged environmental education with religious studies. For the first time, he realized that LDS theology might enhance the discussion.

“Mormons don’t always think carefully enough about the church’s unique narrative about ‘the creation,’ where the world was created out of unorganized matter and not out of nothing,” Handley says. “It’s hard to reconcile creation out of nothing with what we know about evolution. Our [LDS] notion of creation is more compatible with environmental ethics, too.”

In addition, LDS theology posits that the world was created spiritually before materially and that plants and animals have “living souls,” he says. “That is one of the church’s more beautiful doctrines and should be a basis for the ethical treatment of animals and the Earth.”

The Utah-based faith’s health code, known as the Word of Wisdom, entreats Mormons to eat fruit “in [their] season,” and that “flesh also of beasts and of the fowls of the air ... [should] be used sparingly ... only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine.”

LDS scriptures also say that every species should continue to “multiply and replenish” indefinitely, says Handley, author of *Home Waters: A Year of Recompenses on the Provo River* and an adviser to BYU’s EcoResponse club. “Mormons believe that every species and has a right to enjoy posterity.”

Yet many conservative Latter-day Saints put environmental stewardship at odds with economic realities.

“Those are false choices,” Handley says. “One of the easiest ways to ignite religion around environment is to make it about people and not just about plants and animals. What hurts the animals hurts people.”

He sees optimistic signs in the LDS Church’s recent efforts to make its meetinghouses more eco-friendly.

“There is something very doctrinally sound when we talk about conservation of resources,” LDS Presiding Bishop H. David Burton said last year while touting a “green” stake center in Farmington that boasts solar panels, xeriscaped landscaping and designated parking for electric cars. “This is a teaching moment. This aspect of our culture has become a vital part of our DNA.”

Handley hopes such eco-zeal becomes even more ingrained in Mormons — to the extent that the “provident living” refrain embraces environmental ethics as well.

### **A clear connection**

Growing up amid Austria’s strong Catholic community, Margret Posch was a natural-born environmentalist.

“Many churches there featured children’s drawings of other young people suffering in a drought,” Posch recalls. “There was always this [implicit] message about how our actions affected the living conditions of other human beings.”

About eight years ago, Posch, with her husband and two sons, toured the United States and chose to settle in Utah because of its stunning landscapes — red-rock splendor, Wasatch majesty, canyon coolness, desert delights.

After settling in, she was surprised to discover widespread resistance to conversations about the environment. Friends and neighbors seemed to see it as a political issue, rather than a religious or moral one, she says. They were uncomfortable even discussing the topic.

She wondered if the link she saw between nature and humans was unique to Austria, but soon realized that it permeated Catholic teachings everywhere. Even the pope warned about the rising threat of global warming.

Two years ago, Posch started a “Going Green Ministry” within her Draper parish, St. John the Baptist Catholic Church. She organized Taizé prayer services to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Earth

Day, handed out small vegetable plants to encourage gardening, discussed how to limit energy use and organized an art contest. Next month, the group will sponsor a Christmas-card-making event, using recycled materials.

"I happen to be Catholic, and this is an expression of my faith," Posch says. "But it's just as much about the ethical care of human beings."

That, she says, is not bound by any faith.

### **Waking up**

David Folland, a retired Salt Lake City pediatrician, spent his youth in Utah and California, immersed in nature's glories.

But it wasn't until Folland attended a lecture by a National Geographic photographer at Westminster College a few years ago that he grasped the urgency of climate change.

After showing stunning shots of the arctic, photographer Paul Nicklen told the crowd that "if current trends continue, all the wildlife you see here tonight will disappear."

Folland was incensed.

"I realized that global warming was happening," he says, "and I needed to do something about it."

Folland, who says he respects spirituality but is not associated with any faith, became an overnight activist. He joined Utah Interfaith Power & Light, has written about the issue and has tried to raise awareness at every opportunity.

He recently traveled with the Citizens Climate Lobby to Washington, D.C., to meet with Utah's congressional delegation about climate change. The delegation — all Mormons — did not seem moved by any of the arguments or literature, Folland recalls. That is, until the activists mentioned the Vatican's recent statement calling on "all people

and nations to recognize the serious and potentially reversible impacts of global warming caused by the anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants ... If we want justice and peace, we must protect the habitat that sustains us."

Patriarch Bartholomew, leader of the 300 million Eastern Orthodox Christians, has become known as "the Green Patriarch" because of his efforts to preserve the planet.

"To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin," the gray-haired patriarch said in a film about the environment. "For human beings to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation, to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air and its life — all of these are sins."

A few years ago, some Christians published *The Green Bible*, with verses and passages that "speak to God's care for creation highlighted in green."

Such religious efforts on the Earth's behalf are growing and spreading, says Susan Soleil, director of Utah Interfaith Power & Light.

"Every faith has something within its holy scriptures [a mandate] about caring for God's creation," she says. "And every religion focuses on caring for the less fortunate ... indigenous people, the poor, the elderly, the sick, the children. We need to be kinder to the planet so it doesn't destroy the places where they are living."

After all, the Psalmist tells us that the Earth and its fullness are the Lord's. Jesus knew that, too.

pstack@sltrib.com

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