

CREATION'S KEEPERS

MORE AND MORE BRETHREN ARE GOING 'GREEN'

by Karen Doss Bowman

Grace Lefever of Spring Grove, Pa., doesn't view weeds as a garden nuisance. For her, they are a tasty blessing—one that most of us have failed to appreciate. As a society, she believes we have put our food choices in the hands of chemists and the government, eating more processed foods than any generation before. In doing so, she says, we have lost the "wisdom of the weeds"—that is, the understanding of our ancestors that nature provides the best nourishment for our bodies.

For more than 30 years, the matriarch of the Sonnewald property has been leading summertime "Weed Walks," introducing guests to the

delightful cuisine of common weeds such as dandelions and purslane. As she leads her guests on casual strolls around Sonnewald—a 60-acre expanse that includes farmland and the Sonnewald Natural Foods store—Lefever teaches them to identify edible and medicinal plants and gives tips for using the weeds in their diets. The dandelion root, she offers, makes "the best coffee substitute you can taste."



Grace Lefever has dedicated her life to healthful and peaceful living.

"We're trying to teach people to try to do better by taking care of their bodies, the temple of the soul," says Lefever, a former Brethren Volunteer Service (BVS) worker and a member of West York Church of the Brethren. "[Taking care of] the whole environment is part of this."

Most people don't think about food when they consider the green movement—the growing commitment to

earth-friendly practices. For Lefever, however, what we eat is closely tied to our appreciation for and stewardship of God's creation. And like her, a growing number of Brethren are committed to making personal and congregational changes to reduce the damaging effects humans have on worldwide climate change.

Christy Waltersdorff, pastor of York Center Church of the Brethren in Lombard, Ill., in September 2007 preached a series of sermons on "Caring for God's Good Creation." The series, which was designed to kick off the congregation's implementation of a "Growing a Green Church" initiative, focused on the first chapter of Genesis: the creation story.

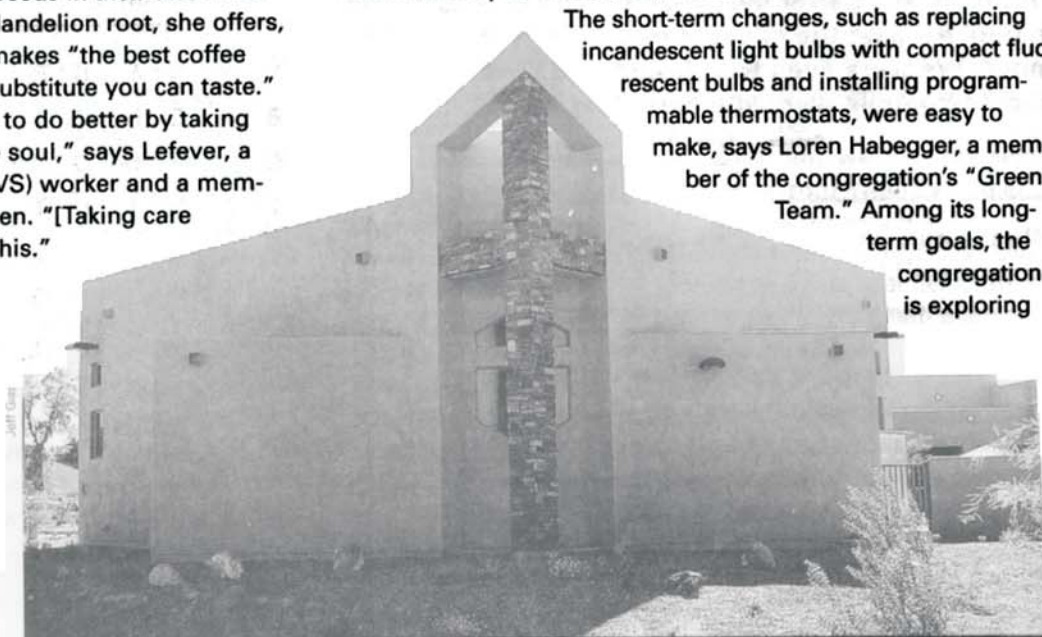
"Having dominion [over the earth] doesn't mean taking what we want and leaving. Dominion means having stewardship," Waltersdorff says. "Creation is a gift of God. God said, 'This is good,' and that's our mandate, to take care of what God has given us."

Undoing global warming

The York Center congregation has made a commitment to reducing its carbon dioxide emissions by 80 percent by 2050, outlining specific steps to be taken and making a timeline for implementation of the initiatives. Last April, Tom Benevento of New Community Project visited the church and led a workshop on environmentally sustainable living and conducted an energy assessment of the church building to develop a "baseline inventory of current emissions."

The short-term changes, such as replacing incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs and installing programmable thermostats, were easy to make, says Loren Habegger, a member of the congregation's "Green Team." Among its long-term goals, the congregation is exploring

The unique Papago Buttes Church of the Brethren building in Arizona uses sustainable building principles.



Tom Benevento, left, works in his community garden in Harrisonburg, Va.



New Community Project

ways to reduce the amount of driving its members do for church-related activities, by promoting carpooling or bike riding, or by carefully scheduling meeting times to allow for greater transportation efficiency.

York Center also installed a compost bin, which members are encouraged to use, and recycles printer cartridges. Paper products are no longer used for most potlucks and coffee hours. Instead, everyone pitches in to wash dishes.

These efforts are similar to those of congregations across the denomination, including Morgantown (W.Va.) Church of the Brethren, which recently invited Benevento to conduct an energy assessment.

"As people of God who are called to be stewards of the earth, it's important that we model and witness what needs to be done," says Torin Eikler, co-pastor of the Morgantown congregation. "It sends a powerful witness when congregations do it together as a body."

Building a smaller carbon footprint

When the need arises for a new building, some congregations are choosing green building projects. Even though the cost of construction is higher than traditional construction projects, the energy savings over time make the project worth the cost.

Three years ago, Papago Buttes Church of the Brethren of Scottsdale, Ariz., moved into its new 8,890 square-foot meetinghouse—one of the first major nonresidential construction projects under the city's Green Building Program. The building incorporates more than 50 items designed to save energy, water, and natural resources. And the pink color—that's a stunning feature that blends with the surroundings, explains Jim Walters, who chaired the building committee.

"The color is inspired by the rocks in the buttes at sunset, so it fits into our environment," Walters says.

Some of the green features of the building include a drip irrigation system to supply water to the desert plants, which require only small amounts of water to live; waterless urinals; 11-inch-thick concrete walls insulated with a layer of

Styrofoam; and a petroleum-free decomposed granite parking lot. The building also uses low VOC (volatile organic compounds) paints and has no carpeting on the poured concrete floors for a healthier indoor environment.

Farther west, First Church of the Brethren of San Diego is in the process of constructing the Friends Center, a green building project that is a partnership between the congregation, the San Diego Peace Resource Center, the San Diego Friends Meeting and the American Friends Service Committee. This building, which will be located on the church's nearly 6-acre property, is the first permitted straw bale construction project within the San Diego city limits.

That's right: straw bales. The exterior walls are constructed out of stucco filled with a 2-foot thick interior made of rice straw bales. The building also features in-floor radiant heat, solar-heated water, and solar-powered electric. The landscaping includes an orchard of about 100 fruit trees, tended primarily by a group called Gardeners for Peace, that will be used to help homeless people in the community.

The San Diego congregation hopes the Friends Center, erected mostly with volunteer labor, will be ready for open house tours during this summer's Annual Conference in the city.

The healing gardens

For New Community Project's Benevento—a former BVSer and former director of the denomination's Latin America program—caring for the earth is closely tied to caring for the homeless people he meets near his home in Harrisonburg, Va.

He is turning his homestead and several adjacent lots into