

St. Matthews “Caring for Creation”

Recycling. Community gardens. Cooking and canning classes. Medicine collections. Preparing meals for community-wide distribution. Parks fundraising and cleanup. Clothing and toy and sports equipment swaps. A sustainability fair. A winter farmers market. Pancake breakfasts and soup lunches. Composting. Solar panels. Reusable shopping bags.

The common denominator in these diverse efforts is St. Matthews Ev. Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, and its commitment to “Caring for Creation”. Starting in 2006 with a small group of people with a general interest in environmental issues, the “Caring for Creation” movement at St. Matthews has grown into a vibrant congregational effort that has not just a church-wide or community-wide reach, but an international reach -- in just 7 short years.

How did they do it? “Caring for Creation”, and environmentalism in general, is a big idea and a huge commitment. What can one person – one group of people – one congregation -- really accomplish?

They did it by recognizing that small, sustainable steps grow into larger ones, and small ideas can inspire large efforts. They did it by recognizing that caring for creation is our responsibility – our job – given to us by God’s own hand: we are to be stewards of the earth. They did it by beginning with small, achievable steps which showed people that as individuals they can make a difference – because only then, when enough people are aware of their own personal impact (and responsibility) can they work together to make larger differences in our churches, communities, and beyond.

They did it by starting small: something as simple as collecting empty prescription pill bottles for an inner city health center – something that even senior citizens could do – empowered their congregation to make a difference. In less than 6 months, they collected so many pill bottles that the health center had enough to save them \$800 – funds that could then be used for medicines! And by building on little successes like that, the church is now collecting and personally delivering medical supplies to a homeless shelter in El Salvador!

Rescuing trees from an abandoned nursery turned into a donation of over 100 trees to replant in a local park that had been devastated by floods and subsequent floodplain construction – and continued involvement in the parks turned into spring cleanup and invasive plant removal efforts to help them remain places where we can all appreciate the wonders of nature – urban places where herons wade in the ponds and native wildflowers sway in the summer breezes.

Working in the parks reminded some of the necessity of fresh water. Unused/expired medications were collected and turned over to area hospitals, so that they wouldn't be flushed into the community water system. A simple thing: one person collects the medications on a Sunday morning, another delivers the collected medications to the disposal site – but a powerful statement.

Planting community gardens one summer turned into fundraising for future efforts and inspiration for gardens at an inner-city church. Making salsa and pesto and boursin cheese, and sales of those products on Sunday mornings, turned into donations to Growing Power and Walnut Way and Alice's Garden to alleviate "food deserts" in the community. Soup from produce grown by the church was served at congregational events; and soup-making classes at those events showed people how to eat healthier on a budget! Canning classes grew out of the thought to preserve the garden's bounty and help people eat healthier.

Unwanted food from a church banquet, and someone's thought to deliver it to an inner-city ministry rather than discarding it, has grown into a meal ministry that "rescues" unsold/unused food from local grocers and caterers, repackages it, and distributes 1,500 meals a week to 12 Milwaukee inner-city churches! The ministry has grown at such a rate that it has outstripped St. Matthews' church kitchen – so the church appealed to its congregation and local foundations and asked for funds to expand. Enough funds were received to purchase 6 commercial refrigerators/freezers and expand the ministry by hiring a few part time employees!

St. Matthews raised funds from its congregation to install solar panels on the roof of one of its buildings – a statement of the church's commitment to renewable energy. Today, on its website, one can watch the power being generated back into the public power grid.

"Care for Creation" is a large umbrella that can shelter many ideas!

Annually, along with other stewardship and commitment materials, all members of the church now receive a "Covenant With Creation", developed to remind people of the simple steps they can take and to encourage them to commit to take them: recycle newspapers, magazines, eyeglasses, cellphones; walk in a local park; eliminate one meal of red meat per week; compost food scraps; utilize reusable shopping bags; refill water bottles; buy/shop locally; put a lid on pots and pans while cooking; keeping vehicle tires inflated – all little steps that encourage bigger ones. It reminds people that "Caring for Creation" isn't a difficult process – just thoughtful one. Each year, more and more of the Covenants are completed and returned – a testament to the congregation's commitments, both large and small, to caring for God's creation as He asked us to do.

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

St. Matthews Ev. Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa continues to heed the words of St. Matthew to ask and seek; the doors of opportunity continue to open, and it continues to embrace those opportunities to serve, and its responsibility to care for, all of God's creation.

And the Church and its members keep in mind the prayer of the Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero:

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete . . . no program accomplishes the church's mission . . . no set of goals and objectives includes everything.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, and opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders – ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

Amen

It keeps us all humble.