As faith communities emerged as leaders advocating for climate solutions, Interfaith Power and Light (IPL) launched its behaviour change program aimed at reducing the carbon footprint of congregational buildings across America. Cool Congregations is designed to support faith communities to “walk the talk” and reduce their carbon footprint through a range of actions – from switching to LED light bulbs to installing solar panels on roofs. The hope is that seeing change within congregations will inspire individuals to take steps at home as well. It effectively frames sustainability based on commonly held stewardship values, provides hands-on ways for congregants to make shifts in their energy consumption behaviours that ladder up to collective actions including engaging around policy change, and measuring and celebrating accomplishments along the way.

**PRINCIPLES IN ACTION**

Cool Congregations explicitly taps the faith-based mandate to “care for Creation and to act as good stewards to preserve life for future generations” and each congregation’s moral responsibility to do what it can to live more lightly on the Earth. These values extend beyond leaving the planet a better place for others and protecting those currently living here from inequities. The path they have laid out is clear: to align hearts with minds before moving towards solutions.
Cool Congregations may be driven by a moral imperative but the program is decidedly action-oriented. The initiative has developed a Cool Congregations Calculator to help measure congregations’ carbon footprint and identify the best ways to reduce it. A detailed toolkit then guides communities through a path of action, from creating a mission statement to specific actions to cut energy and carbon. Using a friendly sense of competition, the program motivates each congregation to work separately in service of making a collective impact. These competitions have helped the initiative to achieve, on average, a 42% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions for participating congregations. More than two million pounds of GHGs are saved each year by just 20 congregations, which is the equivalent of not burning one million pounds of coal every year, or driving 2.3 million fewer miles. To illustrate the full potential of the program, the Environmental Protection Agency noted that if all of America’s 370,000 congregations were to cut energy use by just 20% it would reduce 2.6 million tons of GHGs – equal to eliminating emissions from 480,000 cars.

Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light (MNIPL), a state affiliate of IPL that also runs a regional Cool Congregations program, is leveraging its individual behaviour change initiatives to tackle the greater socio-economic barriers to social change. In response to the state’s new solar requirements, MNIPL helped create the Just Solar Coalition, which works to ensure vulnerable and low-income communities benefit from these new regulations, not just the wealthy. The first effort will be to build a solar garden that generates enough power to offset the electricity use of around 50 homes in north Minneapolis, a largely African American and low-income neighbourhood.

The premise for Cool Congregations is that each participating parish helps level up to a large, national GHG reduction, and that each participant will apply the learnings in their own lives. This has driven impressive results, which IPL turns into inspiring success stories, with examples ranging from Kentucky-based Buddhist communities completing an energy retrofit on their place of worship, to the largest community-supported solar project in West Virginia.
DIVERSITY

True to its name, IPL is an interfaith effort that brings multiple religions and denominations together around shared goals related to energy conservation, efficiency, and climate protection, though most of its participants are of Christian faith. The organization points out that “every major religion has a mandate to care for Creation” and have compiled these mandates -- from Buddhism to Christian sects -- on their website to demonstrate this commonality across faiths.

IPL also recognizes diversity by acknowledging how climate change disproportionately impacts the world’s poor, and the moral obligation the faith community has for working towards equity and justice for vulnerable populations. Many of IPL’s state affiliates are working at the intersection of environmental and social justice issues and bringing their resources to bear in support of a range of issues that impact people beyond the congregation, such as efforts to oppose pipelines on traditional Indigenous territory in North Dakota.

Addressing Equity in Sustainability

Communication materials include practical guidance to support congregants in making lifestyle changes. The following example is part of a “25 Tips under $25” kit that recognizes sustainability shouldn’t just be for the wealthy.

Image: Cool Congregations
COMMUNICATIONS TAKEAWAYS

Connecting with Audiences:
Tune into where people are at in their sustainability journey

It is important to understand where audiences are at in their journey to having more sustainable lifestyles and tailor approaches to their stage of change. For example, IPL does not have an explicit target audience or segmentation system but uses regular interaction with their congregations to gauge readiness before asking for larger commitments. Those deemed ready are tapped to share their experience of the benefits, challenges and choices associated with energy saving behavioural change, or advocate for policy change, whereas people just setting out may be better motivated by having an experience with trusted peers (e.g. touring the energy efficient home of a fellow congregant).

Framing:
Make the moral case but use caution regarding messengers and approach

Moral frames can be used when there is a shared philosophical outlook, such as among members of a faith community, as they can open hearts and put the focus on the common good. Moral frames can provide a starting point for conversations that lead to action, program and policy work, which can incorporate scientific arguments and data. While moral messages calling on faith-based individuals to act on climate change can be compelling, research advises caution on taking this approach with the broader public unless the moral call is tied to more secular, universal values such as fairness or equity. Authentic messengers who share moral values with audiences are also critical for the approach to resonate.

Strategy:
Build on existing relationships

Cool Congregations leverages the existing relationships between those who share common values and trust as these relationships provide much-needed support during the behaviour change process and help individuals who confront challenges on the way by providing hands on guidance and emotional support.

Tactics
Reward leadership and inspire through competition

Contests and award ceremonies that recognize participants in front of their peers for their achievements can motivate further action. Cash incentives can make a difference, however, the IPL Cool Congregation Challenge competition illustrates that publicity online, in newsletters, and public presentations is more essential.

MORE INFORMATION

http://www.coolcongregations.org/about/what-is-a-cool-congregation/
http://www.climateaccess.org/blog/lessons-field-targeting-your-audience
http://www.coolcongregations.org/take-the-challenge/what-is-ccc/
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