Middlebury College
Environmental Studies Senior Seminar

Vermont Interfaith Power and Light

Survey Report
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Sara Bachman, Juliana Kay, Miriam Nielsen, Leslie Reed, Mollie Young,

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Introduction

The survey was sent out to 80 member congregations and affiliated individuals of Vermont Interfaith Power and Light. The survey was created on Google, and sent to recipients via email. Betsy Hardy provided an Excel Spreadsheet with the needed contact information. Some of the email addresses were inactive. We received roughly 20 responses over a 5-week period. The survey can be found at: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1xIMJ23Z6JU71LiN5Vptrykh0a0-313vE1DckbxVBwM/viewform

Some of the responses provide specific information about congregations regarding their relationship with VT IPL, such as updated contact information or newsletter requests; other responses reveal broader trends in the connection between faith organizations and environmental action. Our hope is that these survey results will guide Vermont Interfaith Power and Light as it plans for the future and aims to maximize its impact across the state.

This report analyzes trends and patterns that we gleaned from the survey results. Our analyses are sorted by question and are not attributable to any specific congregation. We provided the full transcripts of all the responses to VT IPL so that they can decipher information about specific congregations across the state.
Survey Questions and Responses

Is your congregation a member of VTIPL? If yes, for how long? What made your congregation decide to join VTIPL?

Congregational membership of VTIPL has grown over the years, the most recent members joined during 2013, while the oldest memberships began 5 or more years ago. There were common themes as to why congregations and individuals joined VTIPL. Some joined because of a growing awareness of climate change issues or of the need to conserve energy, or because of recent changes in energy consumption or production. For example, “we joined around the same time that our congregation created our own Eco-Mission Group” or, “when we decided to put solar panels on the roof,” or because they received an energy audit from VTIPL. Many respondents indicated that the reason they joined VTIPL was because their own beliefs are very much aligned with the organization’s mission: “we joined because it seemed like a natural fit” or “we joined because the work of VTIPL deeply resonates with the values of this church.” The 2011 VTIPL conference was mentioned as one reason a congregation became a member of VTIPL. Lastly, several respondents indicated that they became members of VTIPL because of personal connections within their congregation. Some congregation members have personal affiliations with VTIPL board members, and brought information about the organization back to their congregation who then became members of VTIPL. Another example of this personal connection is when an individual within a congregation becomes a member of VTIPL on their own, and later shares information about the organization with their congregation, who is then inspired to join.

Are you aware of the national organization, Interfaith Power and Light, of which VTIPL is a state member?

Two-thirds of respondents are aware of Interfaith Power and Light as a national organization, and one-third of respondents indicated that they were unaware of the larger organization. Perhaps a goal of VTIPL may be to bring awareness within their member organizations to the larger movement. This may promote more confidence and energy within the smaller group’s work to know they are part of a national effort.

Whether or not your congregation is a member of VTIPL, what is your primary source of information about the services and resources that VTIPL offers?

The majority of respondents indicated that they use the newsletter as the primary source of information about the services and resources offered by VTIPL. Other sources of information are contact with VTIPL board members, word of mouth from other congregations that are members of VTIPL or know about the organization, or the website.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Source of Information</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newsletter</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word of mouth from other congregations that are members of VTIPL</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word of mouth from members of other congregations who are not VTIPL members but are familiar with the organization</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many respondents are familiar with, and have taken advantage of, the resources and services VTIPL offers Vermont congregations. The most common service used is the energy assessment. The energy assessments are a free service offered through VTIPL. One volunteer from the organization has provided these “walk throughs” for all member organizations. The energy assessments differ from a full energy audit, but still identify many areas of potential energy improvements within a building. Eight of the twenty responders indicated that their congregation had received an energy assessment through VTIPL. Six of the remaining twelve respondents indicated that they had received an energy audit provided by another organization. In terms of the broader movement of greening faith-based communities, it is significant that 14 of 20 congregations have had some sort of energy assessment or audit done either through VTIPL or another organization. Other resources mentioned include: using the “low carbon diet” workbook, offering book studies or film showings, attending the semi-annual meeting, participating in the resource workshop and/or hosting Betsy Hardy as a guest speaker.

The newsletter was mentioned often as the way people and congregations are aware of these resources. However, there were a handful of respondents who were unaware of the services provided by VTIPL. Respondents often indicated that they were unaware of the services and resources because the congregation leaders were new to Vermont, or new to the congregation; however, they would love more information about both what VTIPL is and how the congregation can benefit from its existence and its membership.

*Do you receive the VTPL newsletter? If so, what aspects do you find particularly useful or interesting? What aspects are less useful or interesting? What is your preferred method of receiving the newsletter, email, paper version, or both?*

The newsletter is a resource that almost all respondents find very useful. All respondents prefer to receive the newsletter via email. Some components of the newsletter which were highlighted as being particularly useful included: “information on upcoming events and legislation,” “local events,” and information about “what other churches are doing.” The newsletter was referred to as a “great compendium of activities and efforts” and many respondents appreciate reading the success stories from other congregations and faiths. One respondent mentioned that they forward the newsletter on to members of the congregation who would find it most interesting.
Perhaps VTIPL could suggest that more congregational leaders do this, so that members of congregations became more informed about VTIPL, the climate crisis, and energy conservation. It may also be beneficial to highlight success stories within the newsletter to promote a connection within the community and provide inspiration.

This sort of feedback is important to VTIPL, since with only one employee, it’s valuable to know that members find the newsletter worthwhile.

**Does your congregation have a “Care for Creation” Committee, “Green Team” or other group that focuses on the environment? How long has this group been active? How many members are typically in the group? Briefly describe the group’s main activities.**

The presence of “Care for Creation” Committees, “Green Teams” or other groups that focus on the environment within congregations varies. Roughly half of respondents indicated the presence of a “Green Team” within their congregation:

“We’ve been active for the better part of three or four years. We have approximately twelve members on the team. They meet monthly to discuss issues, education and awareness for the congregation and wider community. They also promote usage awareness at home by selling CFLs and making information available about LEDs and other "green" products.”

“Our team was created about a year ago. We give weekly presentations each Sunday, started a garden to serve food shelf of HOPE, we are exploring solar panels, and are attending the November 16th VTIPL workshop.”

“We have a Green Team, active since last spring. There are 4 of us currently. We organize a weekly "Creation Care” moment before the worship service, with information about climate change, living sustainably, readings/poems to inspire care for the Earth. Also are preparing to garden next spring, and working on the possibilities of using solar energy.”

“Yes, we have a Green Team. The most recent iteration of the group consisted of a half-dozen church members. Earlier this year, we hosted environmentally themed films for public viewing, we participated (and lead) an environmental workshop for Vermont Conference, United Church of Christ, and we took part in the denomination’s 4-1 Earth initiative.”

Some respondents indicated that although there is no specified group or committee promoting energy conservation or environmental awareness, the congregation has taken steps to increase recycling, composting, energy efficiency, etc. Several respondents noted that although there is no specific environmental committee, the congregation has other social action and justice committees that address environmental concerns. A large number of respondents, however, noted that there is no committee of this type, or any type, within their congregation. The most common reason for this that was noted in the survey is because of the size of the congregations. Respondents expressed that creating a group specifically dedicated to environmental concern and action was nonsensical given the lack of people power and numbers. Most of the groups that did not have environmental groups
or social justice groups did not have any groups at all. There may be concern for the environment within the congregation, but no formalized group talking about the issues, or making changes within the congregation.

**Does the leader of your congregation (e.g. pastor, rabbi, priest) speak about or express concern for environmental issues such as climate, habitat loss, pollution, etc. as a part of your community's mission?**

For the most part, respondents noted that leaders of their congregations speak about or express concern for environmental issues such as climate, habitat, pollution, etc. as part of their community's mission. Many respondents noted that caring for the environment is part of their religion’s theological imperative. The amount that leaders speak on the issue varies from very often, to maybe once or twice a year. This comes in the form of sermons, private discussions, or special meetings. Those leaders who do not speak about these issues expressed concern that these issues are politicized and some members of congregations are not open to discussing climate change or global warming.

It could be beneficial for VTIPL to write about this challenge, suggesting ways to get around the political component of the issue—so that climate change is discussed more wholly throughout congregations, even ones that are divided on the issue of climate change. VTIPL’s involvement could help leaders incorporate discussion about the environment and climate crisis into their sermons, discussions, or private meetings, without dividing the congregation.

**Has your congregation ever had a worship service with an environmental theme (perhaps around Earth Day, The Feast of Saint Francis, Tu B'Shevat or an ITPL climate “Preach-In” in February)?**

Almost all respondents indicated that their congregation has had a worship service with an environmental theme—the most common of these services around Earth Day. One note that reappeared throughout the survey was that individuals enjoyed—and their congregation benefited from—when Betsy Hardy or Sam Swanson came to give a guest sermon about earth care.

Although Betsy's time is limited, this could be another service that VTIPL could provide for its member congregations. One idea is for VTIPL to develop a “Speakers Bureau” of 5-10 people who would be willing to volunteer their time to guest preach or host worships for congregations.
Are there active lay members of your congregation who bring these issues to the congregation?

![Pie chart showing 18 'Yes' and 2 'No'.]

Has your congregation received an energy assessment (through VT Interfaith Power and Light or another organization) or had an energy audit of your building?

![Pie chart showing 18 'Yes', 8 'Yes, via VT IPL', 7 'No, not yet', and 6 'Yes, via another organization'.]
Is taking action to address climate change important or not so important to your congregation? Please pick one:

- **Important** – i.e. congregants and/or clergy are aware of climate change and the congregation has addressed the issue at times. There might be a "green team," but the activity level on this issue is not the primary feature of congregational life and/or not the primary concern of clergy.
- **Very important** – i.e. clergy are concerned about the issue and/or there is a "green team" and/or many active and vocal congregants.
- **Neutral or Divided** – i.e. there has been discussion about climate change, but only (roughly) half of the congregation seems to care about the issue. The other half are more concerned about other issues that religious congregations usually address (poverty, fund-raising in support of congregational needs such as building improvements, community out-reach programs, health and welfare of congregation members, missions etc).

Beyond the existing resources, what suggestions do you have of ways that VTIPL could support your congregation’s efforts to curb climate change? (Be imaginative here! We’re interested in hearing a whole range of ideas.)

We asked respondents to make suggestions for ways that VTIPL could further support congregational efforts to curb climate change, either by improving existing resources or providing new resources. Although almost all responses signaled that congregations were very happy with the work done by VTIPL. Some of the ideas for improvement included:

- Help to make climate change more of an issue of faith... people tend to take environmental/efficiency actions from a secular perspective, i.e. things are cost-effective, rather than they’re the "right things to do"
- Distribute the e-newsletter to all members, with the option to opt out
- Support communication/actions among congregations
- Offer the service of guest-led sermons, or participate in a worship service with the leader of a congregation. Guest speakers were mentioned as a desired resource, as well as workshops and more conferences or meetings
- Assist with creating Green Teams within congregation, and provide resources or guidance for how to make these committees most effective
- Strong follow-up with congregations who have already received VTIPL’s energy assessment is important – VTIPL should capture and share these stories of progress and success with other congregations, to inspire further action
- Publish energy saving tips from individuals, churches etc.
- VTIPL could improve as an organization if it went out to meet, greet, and speak with local congregations more often—this type of connection is vital in growing an awareness of climate change issues and VTIPL, in particular
- Some respondents felt as though they could not make recommendations for improvement because they didn’t have a handle on what resources the organization already provides

Concluding Remarks

From the survey results, our conversations with VTIPL members, our participation in the conference and a few months of discussion on the mission and goals of VTIPL, we have witnessed the power and importance of this organization. The work is happening and the people involved are full of passion and hope. There is so much power and potential streaming from the incorporation of faith into the dialogue of the environmental movement. However, we have found a few major obstacles to the work in Vermont. One is a lack of awareness within member organizations of the full spectrum of services VTIPL offers, another is the distance between involved communities, which prevents communities from knowing what the others are doing, and lastly we have also found a need to address the concern of individuals of incorporating environmental ethics too strongly within their communities.

Perhaps VTIPL needs to begin by improving its effectiveness of conveying its services. We hope our work in creating videos, reaching out through the survey, and creating a map will help with this effort. Then perhaps the focus needs to be on the lack of connection between member organizations; we believe a goal of continuing conversations among member organizations and sharing stories, news, and questions from within one community with the rest of the communities is critical. To do so, there is a need for a forum, beyond the conference, that facilitates discussion among the member congregations. The newsletter is a positive step in this direction. Perhaps this could include creating smaller groups of organizations that are located in close proximity to each other, rather than trying to get the entirety of the state together. This cluster of proximate organizations could function as “friends” that work in collaboration with each other or at least meet regularly with updates and questions.

We also believe VTIPL needs to strongly promote and strengthen their services of guest-preachers and mentors for liturgy. There is a strong desire within member congregations to strengthen this aspect of their work as well as a strong disconnect
between the desire to work with the environmental movement but not incorporate environmental ethics within liturgy and community conversation.

We hope our work helps VTIPL strengthen its outreach both within the VTIPL-member community and within the environmental movement at large. The voices from religious and spiritual traditions are integral in the work to mitigate climate change and create an earth-care ethic. Hopefully, with these recommendations and the information we are providing the organization they will have a clearer picture of their current status and opportunities within Vermont and will decide how they would best like to continue forward.