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The Christian Science Monitor

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A gospel's rocky path from Egypt's desert to print

When the Gospel of Judas first surfaced in Geneva in 1983, scholars wondered if the mysterious text could trigger a reappraisal of history's most infamous traitor.

They never found out, however, because they couldn't afford the $3 million price tag on this second-century gnostic tale. Instead, the fragile pages vanished into private hands and set off on a 23-year, intercontinental journey through fist-pounding negotiations and even periods, reportedly, stuffed inside a Greek beauty's purse.

Now, at long last, the world is about to see the contents. The National Geographic Society last week reported it will publish a translation this spring, when "The Da Vinci Code" film is sure to rekindle interest in gnostic artifacts.

But the saga may be just beginning. That's because thieves apparently lifted the manuscript from the Egyptian desert, kicking off decades of illicit trafficking - and an ethical dilemma: Is it right to pay for and publish stolen documents for the purpose of spreading knowledge?

"The present owners can't sell it because they don't have, in international law, a legal title to something that was stolen," says James Robinson, one of the world's foremost experts on gnostic texts and author of a forthcoming book about the gospel, "The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel." "They're trying to sell the sensationalism of the Gospel of Judas to get as much back as they can from whatever they paid for it."

National Geographic doesn't deny Dr. Robinson's allegation that the text left Egypt without that country's required authorization. Still, the organization stands by its decision.

"Everyone involved believes the materials should be given to Egypt" after scholars finish translating them, says spokeswoman Mary Jeanne Jacobsen. "National Geographic has done its due diligence, and is working with an international team of experts on this artifact to save the manuscript before it turns to dust and is lost forever."

But others worry that those who publish "hot" manuscripts create a tragic incentive. "When you publish material that's the result of recent looting ... you're adding to the value of other pieces similar to it," says Patty Gerstenblith, an expert in culture heritage law at DePaul University Law School in Chicago. That entices others to hunt for treasure, she says, with hopes that even something later branded contraband could still yield a nice windfall.

When an Arabic-speaking Egyptian and his Greek agent first offered the Gospel of Judas to buyers, they sold it as a package with other ancient texts for $3 million - well above the budget of Robinson and other scholars who tried to buy it.

So far, only a handful of inner-circle scholars are familiar with the contents of the Gospel of Judas. Despite the enticing name, experts say it was written at least a century after Judas Iscariot died, so it's apt to be most interesting to academics who concentrate on second-century
gnosticism, Robinson says. Gnosticism is a belief system, deemed heretical by early Christian leaders, that preaches salvation via self-knowledge. Some of its followers lionized biblical figures of disrepute.

Though ancient writing was once a bargain compared to art, Professor Gerstenblith says, prices are climbing as a growing pool of middle-class collectors smells an opportunity to make a profit. In this climate, libraries with potentially valuable pieces have in the past decade experienced what she terms a "rash" of thievery. Example: in August 2005, a map dealer got arrested for trying to sneak a pilfered page out of Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

Other fields with similar quandaries are actively raising their ethical standards in the wake of demands by Italy and Peru this past year that pieces held in American institutions be returned. Last week, the American Association of Museum Directors issued guidelines saying museums shouldn't borrow or lend pieces known to have been stolen or unlawfully moved after 1970, when international standards took effect. But the American Institute of Archaeology faulted those directors for not going far enough in their guidelines to defend against future looting.

By contrast, the American Philological Association (APA), whose 3,000 members study ancient Greek and Roman texts, doesn't address acquisitions issues in its ethics policy, last updated in 1989.

If host nations "want no one to read [an ancient manuscript], that's wrong," says APA Executive Director Adam Blistein. "The world's entitled to know. You want to understand cultures as much as you can, and that means disclosure."

But some researchers say emphasis on disclosure is short-sighted. The dissemination of inadequately documented contents makes scholars increasingly vulnerable to forgeries and threatens to undermine archaeology, says Christopher Rollston, a Semitic studies expert at Emmanuel School of Religion in Johnson City, Tenn. "It is indubitable that collecting precipitates illicit pillaging of archaeological sites," Dr. Rollston says.

Custodians of rare books and epigraphy wonder if the high-profile case might be a sign of a dawning era of new acquisition standards in their field. One example: libraries with books tracing to Soviet or Nazi incursions increasingly must defend the legitimacy of their ownership.

"All of this is a series of attitudes [toward ownership] that are really very, very recent" and still developing in case law, says Daniel Traister, curator of the Annenberg Rare Book & Manuscript Library at the University of Pennsylvania. "In [the art] field, we're used to it. In books and manuscripts, it's still somewhat new."

Collectors and scholars of written material are apt to keep resisting for a while, Gerstenblith says. The reason: their fields have traditionally emphasized the universal value of writings, whereas other archaeological finds are understood to be virtually meaningless when divorced from their place of origin. But as disciplines collaborate, she suggests, those with the most demanding ethical standards will influence the others.

"To say, 'I can study this [written material], I don't care that it was looted' is an attitude that will become the dinosaur, and it will change," Gerstenblith says. "They're definitely behind where the archaeologists are, and that's going to take time" to close the gap.
The power of nun: taking a lead role in shareholder activism

As a shareholder representative who believes in good pay for bottom-rung workers, Ruth Rosenbaum occasionally reminds corporate executives across the table from her that she has a doctorate in economics. In other words, she knows something about business.

But she may get more clout sometimes, she says, when she tells them something more personal: She's a nun.

That's partly because living under vows carries with it a certain moral authority, she says, even in plush boardrooms. It's also because nuns are well-connected in ways that can stir even high-powered executives to action.

"Companies will say, 'We have this program in country X' to address a local problem," says Sister Rosenbaum. "And I have no qualms about saying, 'We have sisters, or we know sisters, operating there. I'd like to talk with them to get some feedback about how this program really works on the ground.' Just saying that anchors the dialogue in a deeper reality."

In one niche of a financial world known for crisp suits and material passions, nuns in modest business attire have emerged as an unlikely group of senior stateswomen. Their role, earned through three decades of private-sector activism, has become one of representing both shareholders and the poor, whom they believe feel the impact of corporate policies most intensely.

As investors gear up for hundreds of shareholder meetings over the next four months, nearly half of the first 299 resolutions filed reflect the initiatives of religious investors. In this faith-filled milieu, newcomers to ethical investing are sometimes surprised to see the field's activism led by dozens of nuns and more than 100 orders of religious women, who invest their communal funds with higher goals in mind.

In 2004, Bill Mills launched the Good Steward Fund, a fund of hedge funds that caters to an ethically minded clientele. But he says he had no social mission of his own until last year, when he attended a meeting of faith-based investors in Philadelphia hosted by the Sisters of St. Francis. "As I got to know these folks, they would say [such things as], 'Sister over there was very instrumental in the first campaign against Philip Morris,' " says Mr. Mills, a Birmingham, Ala., entrepreneur. He knew that social investing had won a number of successes over the years, but says he was inspired "by getting to know the individuals who in fact had made all that happen by virtue of their commitment... I realized ... how much more there was to do and could be accomplished."

Today's investors owe a debt of gratitude to the sisters who laid the groundwork for dozens of shareholder proposals on this season's proxy voting ballots, say some long-time participants in ethical investing.
Investors "who are concerned about how to express their opinions to [companies] are given an opportunity by sisters and others in the faith community to vote on shareholder resolutions on specific issues," says Tim Smith, president of the Social Investment Forum, a network of socially responsible investors. "So it's a platform that's been provided to them."

Nuns routinely work behind the scenes. Sometimes religious orders own stock in a firm and send a nun to represent their social agenda. Nuns also head groups of religious investors, who stand to get a better hearing as a group than they would alone.

Victories don't come often, and marshalling support from even 20 percent of shareholders on a ballot issue can take years. Even so, nuns have seen some successes. Last month, for instance, New York attorney general Eliot Spitzer credited a nun and her allies with persuading General Electric to disclose the $122 million it spent on lobbying, public relations, and legal fees fighting efforts to clean three contaminated sites in New York, Massachusetts, and Georgia.

Sometimes activist sisters have to get their hands dirty. An Alcoa shareholders meeting in 1996 included low-level Mexican employees who had watched the company pollute local water sources and had routinely found bathrooms locked during breaks. Their exchange with management happened with help from Sr. Susan Mika, a Texan Benedictine who had used religious connections to visit Mexico, take notes, and round up a crew of witnesses. Soon after the meeting, Alcoa's CEO visited the Mexican site, fired the regional manager, raised workers' pay, and unlocked the bathrooms.

For Sister Mika, such activism on behalf of religious investors builds directly on her previous work as a mother superior for 18 nuns in the monastery at Boerne, Texas. All of it, she says, has been part of her calling to live by the simple, work- and prayer-focused Rule of St. Benedict.

"Benedictines are very big on stewardship," Mika says. As investors, that means encouraging "sustainable" treatment of all human and natural resources. She sums up the approach as, "We have the Rule in one hand and the Wall Street Journal in the other."

Far away, in New York City, Sr. Patricia Wolf found her way into ethical investing after eight years of teaching, first at an East Harlem junior high school and later at a correctional facility for boys. In 1975, with nudging from the president of the Sisters of Mercy, she explored how the religious order might channel investments into needy communities.

"It was like this eye-popping moment for me," she recalls. "Whole communities were excluded from loans. Banks were buying up blighted communities. [The experience] taught me a way of systemic thinking" that now informs her work as executive director of the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility. It is a 30-year-old coalition of 275 faith-based institutional investors whose combined assets exceed $11 billion.

Like Mika, Sister Wolf sees shareholder activism as a natural outgrowth of her religious order's ideals. In her case, the Sisters of Mercy emphasize justice for the poor. Example: At Wolf's suggestion, the Bronx-based Sisters of Mercy bought stock in Synagro, a fertilizer pelletmaker with a plant in the Bronx, in order to lean on them to clean up emissions caused by burning New York City sewage in the pelletmaking process.

Some nuns point out that the sisterhood entails varied labors for the glory of God. While some feed the hungry and others advocate for humanitarian programs, a third group - the shareholder
activists - aims to change entrenched structures that, in their view, perpetuate injustice.

"It's part of who we are," says Rosenbaum. "It's not enough [to feed the poor]. We have to say, "What needs to change so they're able to feed themselves?"

Today, sisters are pushing firms to look into the costs that HIV/AIDS and global warming could have on their businesses and industries. As they press on these and other issues, the sisters remind observers that for them, even the best business practices will always be just a means to a higher end. "It's a not a calling to corporate responsibility," Wolf says. "It's a calling to an expression of commitment in service to the poor."
Rise of sunshine Samaritans: on a mission or holiday?

By the millions, Americans are jumping at the chance to become missionaries - with one key stipulation of the 21st century: They expect to get their comfortable lives back a few days later.

Evangelicals often build homes or visit orphanages, then explain the roots of their faith to new friends. Mainline Christians tend to focus on providing relief from poverty. This year, tens of thousands of short-term missionaries plan to storm the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast in visible witness to their savior's love for humankind.

They'll do so with the help of dozens of trip coordinators, promising such perks as adventure, fun, and vacations infused with meaning. High season for short-term missions begins this weekend.

As these missions flourish, however, the faithful are debating the wisdom of tailoring outreach programs to suit the needs and wants of missionaries in search of a peak, transformational experience.

Critics say impoverished people, especially overseas, often end up pandering to cash-wielding, untrained missionaries who leave a bad impression and don't make meaningful lifestyle changes upon return.

"We justify our efforts by saying [youth] will come back and make a difference in their own communities, but the research has demonstrated it's not happening," says David Livermore, an evangelical scholar at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary and author of a new book, "Serving with Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence." "Kids are going down and 'loving on' Mexican kids for a week and then coming home and being the same racist white kids they were toward their Latino classmates before they went on the trip."

Others are more hopeful. "We don't really know yet whether it's simply do-good tourism or a profound, life-changing experience for people who do these trips," says Dana Robert, codirector of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission at Boston University. "The jury is still out."

She sees potential for many a reformed worldview in the fact that nearly 1 in 3 American youth now take part in a cross-cultural service projects before finishing high school.

Short-term trips, lasting two weeks or less, drew about 1.6 million Americans to foreign mission fields last year, according to a survey by Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist of religion at Princeton University. Others who study Christian missions, such as Todd Johnson of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, say brief domestic mission trips draw even more participants than international ones.

For hundreds of thousands of students and others on summer vacation, the trip marks the culmination of months of learning to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Agencies make no apologies
for designing trips with missionary-as-beneficiary in mind.

"That's how Jesus intended it to be when he sent people out to minister in his name," says Seth Barnes, who heads Adventures in Missions in Gainesville, Ga. "We view these mission trips as discipling experiences [for paying participants]. We're looking for whatever will optimize their spiritual growth.... It would probably be paternalistic to say we could do that for [indigenous] people in the field."

Short-term mission trips date back to the 1960s when air travel first became accessible to religiously passionate pockets of the middle class, according to Dr. Johnson. But only since the mid-1990s, with the rise of Internet-savvy megachurches, have local congregations attained the tools necessary to bypass denominations and forge their own ties on the ground as far away as Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

"This area of short-term missions has been absolutely transformed over the last 10 years by the rise of independent churches," Johnson says. He finds adventure-seeking, untrained missionaries now run a heightened risk: "The danger is that they make [foreigners] into Americans without even realizing it" by failing to let Christianity take root in indigenous forms.

Risks aside, some veterans of short-term mission trips say the experiences have shaped their outlooks for the better. At age 18, Zoe Sandvig's Indianapolis church sent her to St. Louis on a trip that she says, "inspired me [to see] there are beacons of hope in the inner city," such as a woman whose faith didn't flinch even amid flood damage and persistent poverty. Three mission trips later, including one to Peru, she took up a career last year of writing for a prison ministry newsletter.

Sam Massie of Somerville, Mass., raised $2,000 two years ago for a mission trip to Honduras with 35 other youth from the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. Each day, Honduran tradesmen directed the group in dirt-hauling and bricklaying as an armed guard kept watch. After a week of accommodations with neither electricity nor hot water, the group moved to one of Tegucigalpa's finest hotels and did three days of sightseeing.

In hindsight, the whole trip "sort of felt like tourism," says Mr. Massie, who this month finished his freshman year at Yale University. "There was a sort of novelty to [working alongside poor people]. The focus of the trip was not enough on bringing benefits to the local place."

Despite some reconsideration, short-term missions show no signs of slowing down. Adventures in Missions has about 60 trips planned for June, a fourfold increase from its May lineup.
The moral burden of bankruptcy

With more people buried in debt, Christians argue over forgiveness vs. responsibility.

Consumers daunted by mountains of debt face another uphill climb as they sort through mixed messages on the moral implications of filing for bankruptcy.

On one side, Christian conservatives who applauded last year’s tightening of bankruptcy laws are now appealing to higher authority to tweak the consciences of would-be defaulters. On the other side, voices irked by double-digit interest rates and questionable marketing tactics of credit-card issuers say debtors are often morally justified in seeking relief.

The morality debate is heating up amid signs of trouble for people living on the margins:

• Even though tougher filing laws took effect Oct. 17, the number of monthly bankruptcy filings grew by more than 300 percent between November and March, from 13,758 to 49,977, according to a June report from the Administrative Office of the US Courts.

• Foreclosures on home mortgages were up 38 percent nationally in the first quarter of 2006, according to property tracker RealtyTrac Inc.

• The average American household owes more than $9,300 on credit cards, up from $2,966 in 1990, according to Cardweb.com.

Against this backdrop, advocates for and against the use of bankruptcy disagree about where to lay the blame when someone gets buried in debt.

Christian personal finance guru Mary Hunt has a stern message for anyone considering bankruptcy: "It's absolutely legal, but it is not moral."

"I would say, 'You accepted these credit cards. You had the obligation to know what you were getting into,'" says Ms. Hunt, author of "Living Your Life for Half the Price." "You spent the money, and sure you had a big medical bill, but it probably would not have put you over the edge had you not already been deeply in debt.'"

To make this case, bankruptcy’s critics often cite Psalm 37:21: "The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously." From sources such as Crown Financial Ministries and Dave Ramsey's nationally syndicated radio show, advice seekers hear they have a duty in most cases to keep their payback promises even when life throws them a curve ball.

But another school of thought sees a more complex picture in which lenders also face admonitions to forgive debts. For instance, Jonathan Alper, a bankruptcy attorney in Orlando, Fla., reminds distraught clients that the American legal tradition of allowing for bankruptcy stems from Deuteronomy 15:1-11, which calls for debt forgiveness every seven years. Others agree with Mr. Alper that those who are able should repay, but those unable to do so should not feel
guilty.

In Psalm 37, "the psalmist is talking about [cases where] borrowing money and not repaying it becomes a business strategy," says Gary Moore, a Christian investment adviser in Sarasota, Fla. By contrast, he says, single women should not worry about declaring bankruptcy, for instance, after using credit cards to feed their children.

"Those people ought to go to bed every night knowing that God has granted them debt relief," Moore says. "And they're not, because they hear this garbage [from antidebt Christians]. That's what Jesus called placing heavy burdens on his flock."

"May," a Virginian who requested anonymity to protect her reputation, knows the moral struggle well.

For 14 years, she paid the minimum balance due until she maxed out her credit card on routine purchases such as shoes, clothes, haircuts, gifts, and equipment for her dog-grooming business. Charges initially worth $5,000 resulted in a balance of $10,000, even after she increased her payments to $150 per month. Every day, she hid the mail before her husband could see her predicament, and she remembers wishing "I could go to sleep and not wake up." Yet she kept paying back her debts at close to 20 percent interest.

"I did think, 'I signed up for the credit card. I used it. I have a moral obligation to pay this,' " May says. "If I didn't feel some moral obligation, I would have told these debt collectors to take a hike."
But after a creditor told her she was incurring debt faster than she could pay it down, she spoke to a lawyer, divulged her secret to her husband, and sought protection under Chapter 7.

"I must have paid [creditors] way over $20,000 for a $5,000 debt," May says. "Knowing in my heart that I paid everybody that I owed the original amount plus a reasonable amount of interest, I don't feel any guilt about having filed bankruptcy. I wish I had done it a lot sooner."

In Hunt's view, what matters in resolving the moral quandary is whether the borrower lived up to his or her original promise. But Alper begs to differ because, he says, the circumstances surrounding the original loan are sometimes suspect to a degree that they nullify a borrower's moral duty to repay.

"The people [whom creditors] often solicit are high-risk customers" with considerable vulnerabilities, Alper says. "By contract, they owe the money. But what's the validity of offering a lollipop to a diabetic? Or offering a cigarette to someone who's addicted to nicotine? You're not on an equal footing," and therefore the contract isn't moral in the first place, in his view.

Others might bear some blame as well, according to David Jones, president of the 177-member Association of Independent Consumer Credit Counseling Agencies. He sees bankruptcy as morally justified in situations stemming from uncontrollable events, such as a job loss or medical emergency. But he also blames teachers and school administrators for failing to make credit education a part of most curricula.

"Society has failed many people because [it] hasn't provided the kind of education and help and background that they need," Mr. Jones says. "I suppose you could say [some profligate spenders] are somewhat off the hook, but I'm a little bit concerned about that because there is a
responsibility to be a good financial steward."

In Hunt’s view, individuals benefit far more in the long run from belt-tightening disciplines, such as those she employed to pay nonmortgage debts in excess of $100,000, than they do by filing for bankruptcy.

"There’s a good feeling we get when we’re paying back debt," Hunt says. "Bankruptcy is the opposite of that."

But if restoring good credit is the goal, Jones has some bad news for Hunt’s theory of thrifty virtue. Creditors like to see a recent history of bankruptcy, he says, because it usually means an applicant has poor spending habits, has no debts, and is ineligible for bankruptcy for another five to seven years. In short, this applicant stands to be a near-term cash cow for the creditor.

May’s experience suggests he might be right. She received three credit-card offers - including one from a previous creditor - during one week in June.

"Somebody that has a lot of debt and is paying their debt and straining every month to do so is not nearly as good a credit risk as someone who has just walked out of bankruptcy," Jones says.

"I would hate to invite people into bankruptcy with that scenario, but that happens to be the fact," he concludes.
Backstory: Greenhouse masses

One New England church makes global warming a crusade - but finds sacrifice isn't always easy.

WALTHAM, MASS.

Over cider and cookies, Albert Sack is discussing the internal conflict he often feels between goodness and global warming. He is a member of a Unitarian church here that is trying to set a moral example in helping to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases.

As a retired electrical engineer, Mr. Sack knows global warming is a problem. But by his own admission, he isn't doing enough. He hasn't put solar panels on the roof of his ranch house. He hasn't installed the insulation he knows he should. "I'm not a big guilt person," he says. "But now I feel guilty when I leave the light on outside my door at home. I'm feeling guilty because I'm quite knowledgeable about [climate change], and I'm doing nothing - almost nothing."

Sack is hardly alone in his church's pews. Here in the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, one congregation is learning how hard it is to roll back the effects of industrialization - and to alter their lifestyles in pursuit of religious ideals.

Over the past two years, the First Parish Church, Universalist Unitarian in Waltham, Mass., has made the fight to stop global warming a core moral cause. For 21 months, members held monthly, often weekly, public discussions on the subject. Twice in October, they held free screenings of Al Gore's movie "An Inconvenient Truth." Over the summer, they led the charge in St. Louis when the Unitarian Universalist Association adopted a landmark statement calling on everyone to make significant lifestyle changes to save the planet.

So far, however, the congregation hasn't been able to move with the speed it would like. In the church basement, two aging oil-burners convert less than three-fourths of their fuel into heat. Insulation is scarce, according to a March energy audit. Single-pane glass stretches across windows arching toward a leaky roof. Last winter, the congregation spent more than $9,800 to heat its 21,000-square-foot facility.

Proposals are in the works to help the church practice what it preaches. Among the suggestions: use compact fluorescent bulbs, switch to natural gas heat, install solar panels or even windmills on the roof.

The church also uses its 75-seat chapel, instead of the cavernous church sanctuary, for worship in the summer, when attendance is low. But the congregation hasn't yet made the move to the smaller structure in winter, which could save large sums on heating bills and cut down on emissions. "People don't like to sit as close to one another as they did back in the days when you didn't heat the church," says Susan Adams, a member of the church's Climate Change Task Force.

Indeed, preferences for privacy and convenience can make curbing greenhouse gases difficult,
no matter how well-intentioned worshipers' motives. Unlike some issues, this one involves personal sacrifice rather than political compromise: According to denomination spokesperson Janet Hayes, it calls on Unitarians to question their "fear of intimacy" and "aesthetic preferences," such as living in large homes and relying on private transportation.

"The changes that we're used to asking other people to make are the changes that we have the greatest responsibility in making now because we are the most affluent," says Ms. Hayes. "We do live in the country that consumes the most. Our demographic is more likely than any other to live in the suburbs, to be large users of fossil fuels."

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Meredith Ruland is trying hard to do her part to keep Earth from warming and the polar ice caps from melting. She buys local produce to help cut down on the emissions created by shipping corn, cucumbers, and other goods across country. She often wears gloves at home in winter so she can keep the thermostat at 60 degrees F. She believes, ardently, that a warmer planet threatens the life of many species - including humans.

But Ms. Ruland is far from feeling righteous. She still lives alone in a spacious condominium, drives alone 30 minutes each way to work, and buys fruits and vegetables from distant growers when local stocks aren't available. "I don't think many of us have gotten to the point of making real sacrifices," says Ruland.

Feelings of culpability and ineffectiveness don't dovetail easily with the Unitarian experience. The denomination proudly celebrates a history of being on the noble side of social reforms, from the abolition of slavery to women's suffrage to civil rights. Unitarians place great emphasis on reason and the revelations of science in fashioning a moral code. For members to see themselves now as major contributors to a problem that may threaten humanity worldwide is virtually unthinkable.

"We feel we're entitled to be part of the solution," says Susan Brown. "It's part of being a UU [Unitarian Universalist]."

On this night, members are taking their latest mission seriously as they prepare for a screening of Mr. Gore's movie. Women on the task force flash two thumbs up at one another as visitors claim almost every empty seat in the chapel. Men, clad uniformly in pullover fleece tops, smile and laugh as they discuss what to do about discouraging data on climate change.

"You can't always crucify yourself," says Bill Porter, a biochemist who dropped out of medical school because he felt medicine was contributing to an overpopulation crisis. "It's important to enjoy things," such as hiking in New Hampshire, which he almost didn't do this summer after considering the two-hour, carbon-spewing car ride.

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Principled self-denial, inspired by the example of 19th-century naturalist and Unitarian hero Henry David Thoreau, is proving inspirational to members in their quest. Ron Adams, president of the local church's governing board, practices his version of it by wearing shorts on this brisk autumn night as temperatures dip into the low 40s - part of his ethic of braving the weather. He uses less energy at home by shunning air conditioning in summer and never pushing the thermostat above
62 degrees F. in winter.

"It makes me feel connected to the Earth," Mr. Adams says. "When the temperature changes, it should affect you... It's feeling like life is real."

Whether such traits will make the First Parish Church and its members pioneering conservationists and help prevent the planet from turning into a heat lamp is uncertain. Deeper lifestyle changes raised in questions posed by Ms. Hayes - Must all children have their own rooms? Can't families carpool to church? - haven't been debated here yet.

A simple proposal to leave lights off during 10:30 a.m. worship, when the sun is high, shows the difficulty of making sacrifices: Senior Minister Marc Fredette doesn't want to try it for at least six months because he anticipates resistance.

Still, some members are taking small - and expensive - steps. Ms. Brown bought a used Prius, a hybrid vehicle, last year and spent $1,300 on a new energy-stingy refrigerator. The congregation will soon face its own "This Old House" dilemma: upgrade energy systems or fix a rotting steeple?

Even though many of these steps are costly, the cost of inaction may be paid in the most precious currency: moral authority on a defining social issue. "Internal systems have to change," says the Rev. Fredette, "before we can have any kind of an authentic voice in the community."