

# **Ecology and Spirituality in America: Exploring Possibilities for Cultural Transformation**

**A Research Project Proposal  
Center for the Study of Religion and Culture, Vanderbilt University**

*“There is a profound sense emerging around the globe that we are at a critical moment of transition and transformation. Our present economic mode of unlimited growth and unrestrained development is perceived by many as no longer viable. The increasing social gap between the rich and the poor is seen as no longer acceptable. The mindless ravaging of resources and the conscious abuse of human rights is viewed as no longer tolerable. How to realign our priorities and values within the human community and the earth community remain our fundamental challenge.”*

---Mary Evelyn Tucker, “Reflections on the Earth Charter,”  
Forum on Religion and Ecology, Harvard University (1999)

*“If the environmental crises facing the world today were simply a matter of information, knowledge, and skills, then we would be heading out of these dangers. For more than 30 years the world’s major institutions, scientists, and governments, and some of the largest nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), have compiled and analyzed details of how we are abusing the planet...Yet the crises are still with us. The simple fact is that knowledge on its own is not enough...Ultimately, the environmental crisis is a crisis of the mind...We see, do, and are what we think, and what we think is shaped by our cultures, faiths, and beliefs...[And] if the information of the environmentalists needed a framework of values and beliefs to make it useful, then where better to turn for allies than to the original multinationals, the largest international groupings and networks of people? Why not turn to the major religions of the world?”*

--Martin Palmer, *Faith in Conservation: New Approaches to Religions and the Environment*, The World Bank (2004)

## Overview

The starting point for our project is concern about a consumer culture in which individuals try to satisfy non-material needs through material consumption. We seek to understand how patterns of ever-increasing consumption driven by desires for personal empowerment, social status, and spiritual and social connection might be redirected into forms more satisfying to individuals and less harmful to the environment and local and global political economies. In essence, we see consumer culture as an eco-spiritual problem. Our goal is to explore how contemporary American values, public discourses, and social and material practices might be reframed and reoriented to transform the dynamics of consumer culture from an eco-spiritual problem into an eco-spiritual resource.

This is a three-year project, beginning in January of 2005, in which a core group of faculty will explore possibilities for cultural transformation in contemporary America, with special attention to how these issues relate to our own region of Middle Tennessee. Our collective inquiry is organized around a structure of recurring activities. Each calendar year of the project includes:

- \* four working group seminars that will produce material for publication and electronic dissemination;
- \* four workshops and public lectures by distinguished visiting scholars or artists;
- \* a series of brown bag lunch conversations with local and visiting academics, religious leaders, activists, educators, artists, and policy makers.

In addition, we will organize three major conferences (two in the second calendar year and one in the third) bringing together nationally prominent scholars, culture critics, community leaders, and activists to identify issues and potential paths for transformation at the intersection of ecology, spirituality, and contemporary cultural trends.

Each phase of our project has a specific intellectual product outcome, as detailed in the section on "Pragmatics." By the end of the third year, we will have produced two scholarly books, a reader, a website with extensive electronic links and audio-visual resources, a new graduate seminar, and a presentation and set of educational materials for community outreach. In personal terms, we will have traversed a provocative and politically challenging terrain of ideas, and developed stimulating new intellectual connections both in and outside of our academic venture. At a number of points, our project will engage various university departments, programs, and Centers in several schools, drawing on the participation of faculty and students beyond our core group. We hope this endeavor will be a catalyst for a new level of attention to environmental and eco-spiritual issues on the Vanderbilt campus.

## **Rationale for Exploring Ecology, Spirituality, and Consumer Culture**

“Religion” comes from the Latin *re-ligare*, binding in obligation. Religion and ecology are both about the bonds that connect the world, about identifying the human place in the web of relations and obligations we have to other beings and life forces. We see in many people and places in the contemporary cultural landscape expressions of deep longings for belonging, desires for connection with something larger than the self. The advertising industry capitalizes on and amplifies these desires brilliantly, but material consumption is only one, limited, and often unsatisfying source of meaning and identification. We want to understand how cultural transformation can occur, so that people might be moved to satisfy more of their non-material needs through other means less corrosive to spirit and environment.

If transformation is to happen in the United States, it will have to be motivated by widely shared values and framed in ideas and imagery drawn from American symbolic vocabularies. Spirituality and the environment are two ideas close to the heart of America’s traditional self-identity. The United States has the highest level of religiosity of any nation in the industrialized world. Most Americans like to think of themselves as spiritually grounded people, and discourses about religion and spirituality carry moral and political weight. To succeed on a large scale, a cultural movement will have to offer people a sense of purpose and belonging in a collective, morally grounded enterprise greater than themselves. To succeed on a large scale, such a movement will need to be perceived as compatible with the values of broad sectors of the mainstream American public and their commitments to organized religion and notions of patriotism, personal success, and moral worth.

Relations to nature, land, and local environments are a point of entry for locating common ground and widely shared American values. From the beginning of this nation, relations to the land have been a source of possibility and inspiration. This wondrous continent’s open, wild, and cultivable spaces have been seen as fertile soil for crafting a good life and renewing the soul. The value of connections to land and place—whether expressed in appreciation for our national and local park systems, in nostalgia for rural and small-town pasts, or in close-to-home activities such as urban gardening—is a value shared across the political spectrum.

While the media conventionally identify environmentalism and ‘eco-spirituality’ with the political and cultural left, evangelical Christian circles are increasingly sites of critiques of materialism and consumer culture. Conservative religious discourses are generating some of the most potentially significant developments on the American political/cultural scene, with movements promoting lifestyles of voluntary simplicity based less on material consumption and more on the cultivation of spirituality and sociality. Dissatisfaction with aspects of consumer culture and consensus about the value of both spirituality and the environment cut across many differences and divisions in American society. Our project aims to identify points of convergence where people from diverse religions, perspectives, and social positions express similar criticisms and desires for cultural transformation.

## Timeliness and Relevance

Promoting alliances between spiritual faiths and environmentalism is an idea whose time is ripe. Earlier this year, the World Bank, a key player in shaping international economic development and environmental policy, released a major publication, *Faith in Conservation: New Approaches to Religions and the Environment* (Palmer 2004). This report, which highlights the enormous potential to further protection of biodiversity through cooperation with religious faiths, grew out of work by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, which works with leaders of world religions to explore how their faiths' beliefs, traditions, and resources can be directed toward environmentally beneficial goals.

The President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, notes that religious communities have enormous direct impact on the environment. Eleven major religions (Baha'i, Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shintoism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism) encompass two-thirds of the world's population, own 7% of the planet's habitable surface, play a role in 54% of all schools, and control 6-8% of the world's investment market (Palmer 2004:xi).

*Faith in Conservation* details the diverse and creative ways that religious groups can promote environmental protection. For example, congregations can decide to manage their land holdings in more ecologically beneficial ways. In Britain in the late 1980s, 6,500 churches committed to create native wildlife ecosystems in their churchyards, which they designated "sacred ecosystems" to be maintained without pesticides and mown only once a year. From this effort grew a code of conduct for the environmental management of church lands in general (Palmer 2004:30). Religious leaders make another kind of contribution to environmental protection when they interpret sacred teachings to promote behavioral change in their faith communities. In 2000, for example, Muslim leaders on Masali island (off the coast of East Africa) declared dynamite fishing contrary to the Qur'an and Shariah law (Palmer 2004:3-5). At the level of global economy, the major religions have immense financial clout and property whose management can be re-oriented according to socially and environmentally responsible principles. To cite just one example, the Nashville-based United Methodist Church organization has an investment portfolio valued at around \$70 billion, a \$12 billion pension fund, and a membership of 5-7 million families whose average investment savings (estimated at \$50,000-70,000 per family) have a collective \$250-500 billion worth. With membership numbers like these, it is obvious that relatively small changes in behavior and priorities can have significant impacts when multiplied through the large memberships of faith communities. New, faith-based ethical understandings that motivate individuals and organizations to change how they use money, property, and resources can have seriously positive environmental impacts.

Our project members, several of whom work internationally, recognize the significance of resource use patterns in other countries, and our readings will draw from international literature and case studies. Our primary concern, however, is with the question of how to change behavior here in the United States. The U.S. consumes a grossly disproportionate percentage of the world's resources, and America's corporate dominance, military power, and massive entertainment and advertising industries with their exported stereotypes of consumer bliss have disproportionate influence on global cultural trends. The positive side of this power inequity is

that changes in American values and behavior may set directions in transnational consumer culture and encourage change elsewhere. Altering dysfunctional U.S. norms and practices is essential to hope for any large-scale change in global patterns of consumption and environmental degradation.

### **Project Themes and Approaches**

Which elements of contemporary American culture might be mobilized to shift the direction of consumer culture? To locate creative ideas, symbols, and political, economic, and technological processes, our working group seminars, lecture series, and brown bag discussions will examine the discourses and practices of past and present eco-spiritual critiques and the successes and failures of social movements based on such concerns. The diverse discourses and movements we will examine speak in different, sometimes apparently almost mutually unintelligible dialects, ranging from Christian fundamentalism to neo-paganism, environmental science to earth art. Our project aims to identify common underlying values and vocabularies, and ask how these might be translated to speak to the concerns of broad sectors of the public.

Each of the discourses and movements we explore is based in specific notions of time and contested narratives about the past and future. One's sense of history and the time-frames operating in politics and policy-making directly influence environmental attitudes and practices. Running through the topics we will address are sets of inter-linked themes and questions about time, place, community, the meanings attached to material goods and acts of consumption, technology, ritual, art, and connections to the past and future. In examining historical and contemporary cultural trends and mechanisms for transformation, we ask how to connect our sense of history with the possibilities for going forward. By exploring diverse eco-spiritual critiques and projects, we hope to better answer our central question about identifying the common ideas and values, and the most effective political, economic, and social changes, that might be mobilized to transform key aspects of contemporary consumer culture.

Our inquiry is organized around a series of working groups (seminar modules), each of which explores one piece of American eco-spiritual issues and cultural vocabularies--a set of problems, ideas, values, practices, or historical experiences related to re-imagining possibilities for spiritual renewal in tandem with a healthier environment. In each calendar year, four seminar modules address issues within four broad categories: environmental problems and solutions, contemporary religion and spirituality, American cultural values and vocabularies, and art and artistic experience as a resource for promoting eco-spiritual values and community.

The first year's seminars (in 2005) define the problem and survey the terrain, aiming to develop shared understandings of the theoretical and practical issues at stake. We look at the American experience in general: problems with consumer culture and its environmental impacts; and resources for change in contemporary American cultural values, religions, and artistic traditions. In the second year (2006), we bring the focus closer to home and consider how these issues relate to our regional environment and local communities. In particular we want to ask what a Southern Environmental ethos might look like and what pragmatic paths might lead toward that goal. The third year will extend and deepen our examination of the questions addressed in the previous two years' work. We are leaving the specific questions to be addressed in the third year open

because these will be defined by project participants during the first two years. The third year is the time to deepen our inquiry in directions needed to work out our collective response to the core questions set forth in this project, reflect on the results of our inquiry and finalize the books and other products our project will produce.

## **Goals and Objectives**

Our objectives include the following (see the “Pragmatics” section for details):

- \* To develop an intellectual focus and excitement about eco-spiritual issues on our campus, and foster a network of faculty members, graduate students, and regional community and organization leaders committed to exploring avenues to more spiritually satisfying and environmentally sustainable ways of living.
- \* To support and enhance individual faculty participants’ research agendas through interdisciplinary exchange and exposure to perspectives from fields other than their own (see the “Individual Research Goals” section).
- \* To learn from and create ongoing dialogs with prominent scholars, artists, culture critics, and activists whom our project brings to campus for lectures and conferences.
- \* To produce two scholarly books and a set of electronic resources that further academic and public understandings of the potential and scope for positive cultural and environmental transformation in America and, by extension, in the global public sphere.
- \* To enhance graduate education by involving graduate students in our seminars and other project activities and developing a graduate seminar course curriculum.
- \* To create a resource for undergraduate education by producing a reader on consumer culture, ecology, and spirituality.
- \* To engage in dialog with local religious leaders, environmental organizations, policy makers, business people, and community activists about environmental issues in Middle Tennessee.
- \* To do community outreach by creating educational materials and presentations to local faith communities with the goal of encouraging them to initiate projects to direct their institutional resources and members’ activities toward eco-spiritually beneficial practices.

## **Seminar Module Topics**

As discussed below under Pragmatics, the scope and specific questions addressed in each seminar module will be defined and developed by each seminar's leaders and participants. The following descriptions are thus provisional and subject to change.

### **2005: SURVEYING THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE**

#### **1. Environmental theory and practice: Goals and motivations for behavioral change**

Beginning with an overview of the environmental impacts of contemporary patterns of material consumption, we ask: What types of behavioral changes matter most? What motivates change? How do concepts of time influence environmental attitudes and consumer behavior? How can symbolic and social factors motivate changes in individual and collective behavior? Can non-material values, whether grounded in religion or other sources, substitute for the relative esteem-seeking that now appears to drive much consumption?

#### **2. Symbolic vocabularies of American identity: Nature, landscape, and spirituality**

What place have nature, land, and spirituality held in ideas about America and what it means to be American? How has spirituality seen to be related to the American landscape in the writings of American writers, poets, and historians, from Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman, to Vanderbilt's New Agrarians, and contemporary thinkers such as Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder? What themes are emphasized in popular images of Native American eco-spirituality? What are the pitfalls of primitivism and romanticism in eco-spiritual discourses?

#### **3. Discourses of cultural critique in American religion: Christianity**

Since Christianity is the dominant religion in the U.S., we begin our inquiry by identifying pro-environmentalist and anti-materialist discourses in contemporary Protestant and Catholic denominations. How do religious discourses and movements promote environmental responsibility, stewardship, and voluntary simplicity, and what impacts are these movements having? What are the shared and differing concerns, and convergences or divergences, between conservative Christian critique and liberal environmentalism?

#### **4. Art, nature, and spirituality in the American experience**

The idea of America and a distinctively American spirit and spirituality is closely connected to representations of the American landscape. This module examines key historical moments when art made a difference in cultural transformation, such as in the establishment of our national park system, in Frederick Law Olmstead's vision for Central Park, and in the work of contemporary artists and landscape designers who see earth art and imaginative engagement with nature as gateways to transformation through enhanced environmental awareness and soul-nourishing experience.

Running parallel to this academic project is Yellow Bird, an ongoing, experiential venture in which project members may participate as they wish. Located near Woodbury, TN, and owned by co-director David Wood, Yellow Bird is an evolving space for earth art, environmental education, and experiments in working with sacred space, ritual, and art to build community and bring ourselves into new, re-enchanted relations in the world.

## **2006: MAPPING PATHS FOR TRANSFORMATION**

### **1. Regional environmental issues and resources: Toward a Southern Environmentalism**

What are the distinctive environmental problems of the South in general, and of Middle Tennessee in particular? Which features of the region and its history and heritage—cultural, religious, literary, and legal—pose special challenges to a movement toward sustainability? Which Southern cultural values and traditions intersect with eco-spiritual concerns, and how might these be mobilized to support changes in public policies and individual behavior that impact the environment? How can the methods and discourses of environmental advocacy be tailored to fit the region's widespread religiosity, and work through the region's diverse religious congregations? What are the special considerations regarding Middle Tennessee's numerous new immigrant communities, whose working conditions place them in some of the most dangerous and environmentally toxic conditions?

### **2. Contemporary American religions: Bases for eco-spirituality in faith traditions**

Moving beyond the mainstream and conservative Christian denominations examined the first year, we ask how environmental issues are treated in other evolving traditions, such as Afrocentric, Jewish, Buddhist, and American Islamic discourses. In new movements such as eco-feminism and neo-paganism that are based on explicit environmental critiques, what kinds of environmental activism have been pursued through spiritual networks and organizations? Are there common themes and ideas running through many of these diverse religious discourses? What ideas can we glean from international case studies of positive environmental actions by faith communities?

### **3. Environmental theory and practice: The roles of law and political activism**

How do laws encourage consumption? To what extent do laws undermine the non-material values that are shared by many religious groups and which may be necessary to achieve long-term sustainability? What role can law play in promoting cultural reorientations in favor of prioritizing non-material values? Where and how have groups from diverse backgrounds and political orientations united in environmental action? When and why have movements succeeded or failed?

### **4. Art, nature, and spirituality**

This module examines experiential dimensions of relations among nature, spirituality, and art. What is the role of artful experience and imagination in transforming environmental practices and behavior? How are contemporary artists using art to promote environmental preservation and restoration? How can public art and landscape design reinforce eco-spiritual goals? What are some successful models for community projects using art to promote experiential environmental education?

## **2007: LOCATING COMMON GROUNDS AND RESOURCES FOR CHANGE**

The third year's seminar activities return to the large questions at stake in this project. The four modules will address the four recurring areas of concern listed below. Here, we purposefully do not define the specific focus of this year's inquiries because these are to be generated by the core group's research and evolving understandings developed through the first two years of the project.

- 1. Identifying common vocabularies for changing consumer culture**
- 2. Environmental issues, policies, and practices**
- 3. Religion as a resource for transformation**
- 4. Public art and landscape design as resources for transformation**

At the end of the third year, we will hold a retreat for reflection: What have we learned from our three-year inquiry? What questions remain, and how has this project fit into our larger individual research agendas and development as scholars?

## **PRAGMATICS**

This project's design and product-oriented emphasis have grown out of our experiences in other interdisciplinary ventures such as the year-long Faculty Fellows Seminars at the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities. Recognizing both the strengths and common pitfalls of such collective endeavors, we have designed this project to maximize flexibility and allow individual faculty to tailor the rhythm of their involvement to meet their own intellectual and personal needs and variable time commitments. While building flexibility into the design, we also have created a structure and incentives designed to ensure that specific intellectual inquiries will be followed to conclusion and specific products (such as book chapter drafts and reader selections) will be produced regularly, at each stage of the project, through processes that draw input from all participants without over-taxing any individual.

### **Seminar modules**

The project is organized around a series of twelve, five-week faculty seminar modules over the course of three years, with two seminars per semester. A standard model would be five weekly, two-hour meetings, but seminars are free to organize themselves differently to fit their participants' needs. Each seminar module focuses on a theme and a specific set of questions. These questions will be laid out in the first session and answered collectively in the fifth. Participants must understand that the goal is to develop preliminary answers to these specific questions, not to cover the entire field or range of disciplinary perspectives involved.

We envision that each working group for a five-week seminar will consist of 6-10 faculty per module. The specific faculty participating in various seminars will vary, but each should include at least three core project members. Other, non-core faculty with relevant interests will be invited to participate as well, allowing us to draw on the specific expertise of others in our campus community.

Each seminar will be developed and directed by two key faculty members, whom we title “co-inspirators.” At least one of the co-inspirators must be from the core project group; the second may be an outside VU faculty member with expertise on the topic. The co-inspirators have responsibility to define the questions to examine and organize reading materials and seminar activities. In the semester before their seminar, they will write a one-page definition and description of their seminar module’s questions, goals, and scope. This announcement will be shared with and commented on by the core group and with outside faculty with relevant interests who may be invited to participate. After the participants have been identified, the co-inspirators may revise the module’s definition and focus to take account of feedback from prospective participants. They will then plan the sequence of discussion topics, readings, and speakers or other activities for the coming semester.

At the end of each five-week seminar, one (or both) of the co-inspirators will write up the results of their group’s inquiry and activities in a short (perhaps ten-page) summary paper. This draft will be circulated to the individuals who participated in the seminar and to all the core project members, soliciting their comments, reactions, and elaborations. The paper’s author(s) may then incorporate or respond to this feedback in an expanded version of the text (perhaps 20-25 pages in length). By the end of the second year, we will have eight “working papers,” consisting of two papers on each of the four major topical areas (American cultural vocabularies, religion and spirituality, environmental problems and solutions, art and landscape design). These working papers may be posted on our website. During the third year, the four topical seminars will review the working papers developed on that topic in previous years and push the inquiry further to address unanswered questions, tie up loose ends, and recommend ideas for the final books based on these working papers.

### **Visiting scholar/artist/activists**

Each seminar module includes and builds toward a visit by a noted guest scholar, artist, or activist who will engage in a workshop/discussion attended by seminar participants and the core project members who wish to attend. This distinguished visitor will also present a public lecture or other event open to the larger Vanderbilt and/or Nashville communities. We will work closely with departments and programs to mobilize additional financial resources and organize other activities around the visitor’s visit.

When feasible, we will film lectures, conversations, and interactive events with these distinguished visitors. Video excerpts may be posted on the web, with the possibility of a larger visual project to develop from this documentary record. The project budget

includes an allocation for the services of a graduate student to maintain the project's website and film and photograph lectures and special events.

### **Problem-Focused Symposia**

We will organize a number of two-day problem-oriented symposia – perhaps one per semester - bringing in outside experts. Some examples of possible topics:

1. The economics and environmental impacts of consumption
2. The legacy of the Southern Agrarians at Vanderbilt (with Paul Conklin, Wendell Berry?)
3. Nature in theory: the ideal of pristine nature, and its drawbacks
4. Nature in practice: the accelerating artificialization of the earth
5. The shifting “nature” of what it is to be human
6. Vanderbilt's legacy in environmental economics (incl. Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, Herman Daley and Cliff Russell)
7. Environmentalism and spirituality  
[keynoted by Al Gore and including a presentation by the Dalai Lama?]
8. Quantifying Happiness
9. The Environment and Human Security

We plan to liaise in advance with appropriate journal editors to enhance the likelihood of publishing outcomes.

### **Weekly noontime meetings: Project meetings and conversation series**

Each semester, twelve weekly noontime slots (hopefully at a regular time each week) will be reserved for project events, with lunch provided. Four of these gatherings (one per month) will be meetings of the core project group; core participants are expected to attend whenever possible. The other eight weekly noontime gatherings per semester will be informal “brown bag conversations” with invited guests--visiting scholars and artists, local religious leaders and environmental activists. Core participants may attend these “conversations” sessions at their discretion. A graduate research assistant will take notes on these conversations.

## **Conferences**

We plan to organize three conferences. Formally (see our budget) we are proposing holding one conference a year, but we would like to retain the option of spending the first year identifying interesting conference speakers as we familiarize ourselves with the literature and develop our collective understandings of questions and issues. By the end of the second year (2006), we will have held two conferences on the prospects for developing a new Southern Environmentalism. The first conference will be theoretically and historically-focused, examining the cultural, religious, and symbolic materials out of which a regionally-appropriate environmental ethos might be forged. The second conference will explore practical political and organizational challenges, models, and on-the-ground successes and failures. In the third year, we will hold a major national conference on the central topic of our project.

## **Retreats, Field Trips and Group Travel**

We plan periodic local retreats for assessing progress, planning the future, and exploring possibilities. We will also arrange field trips where appropriate (to places and communities of special interest), and, in the first two years, occasionally fly the group to special sites and other groups and/or conferences from whom we can learn.

## **Vanderbilt University's Distinctive Role**

Vanderbilt University is ideally positioned to play a leading role in promoting conversations and partnerships around eco-spiritual issues and the concept of a new Southern Environmentalism. Our project is a natural extension--updated and re-imagined for the 21<sup>st</sup> century--of several of the most distinctive aspects of the university's history and intellectual traditions.

The most famous literary movement associated with Vanderbilt was the group of 1930s poets and critics known as the Agrarians, whose manifesto "I'll Take My Stand" (1930) will have its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2005. While their outmoded cultural nostalgia and racist baggage is irrelevant today, the core questions they raised still command attention: how to preserve the vital traditions of the South, the significance of place, and the values associated with working the land. We aim to redefine these questions to fit the needs of today's diverse society, while building on the central concerns the Agrarians expressed, about the need to find forms of community and spirituality appropriate to our region's cultural situation. This is far more diverse today, and fertile in its diversity, than they in their nostalgia for an idealized agrarian past, could have recognized.

Our project recognizes intellectual kinship with several other outstanding Vanderbilt people who have made important contributions to environmental theory and social change. These include Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, the economist who laid the foundations for evolutionary (subsequently environmental) economics; former Vice-President Al Gore, who studied at both Vanderbilt's Law and Divinity Schools and authored *Earth in the Balance*; and Jeff Carr, our former General Counsel, who since

retiring in 2000 has formed Cumberland Region Tomorrow, a coalition of businesspeople and others in the public sector building bridges between policy research and education and the community at large. In addition we have contacts with Paul Sloan, a well known local environmentalist, who is on the steering committee of the Regional Environmental Forum ("REF"), a multi-stakeholder group that has successfully hosted three public gatherings on environmental issues in Middle Tennessee. These are connections upon which we will draw in developing our conferences and campus conversations.

In the 1960s, students and faculty from Vanderbilt Divinity School reached beyond the traditional limits of what was then an almost all white, male, Southern elite institution to play a significant role in Nashville's civil rights movement. Forty years later, the time is ripe to mobilize our faculty, student, and institutional resources for intellectual and moral leadership to promote progressive ecological and spiritual values and practices. In conversations with representatives from regional environmental groups, we have found leaders of local organizations highly receptive to proposals for dialog and partnership with the University community. They especially appreciate the power of Vanderbilt's public visibility and capacity to host conferences, lectures, and other forms of conversation and cooperation among scholars, community leaders, and activists.

In thinking about Vanderbilt's relation to eco-spiritual issues, it is also worth noting that, as the largest employer in Davidson County, the University's own environmental policies and practices (i.e., energy efficiency, resource consumption, construction standards, recycling and waste disposal, traffic patterns, etc.), have big environmental impacts. The sheer size of the University means that even seemingly small policy changes have significant effects, not just on local ecology but also on the institution's financial bottom line. Heightened awareness and attention to environmental issues can have practical as well as intellectual benefits for our campus.

The conferences and program of visiting scholars, artists, and activists organized and sponsored or co-sponsored by our project will bring outstanding, innovative thinkers to campus. We hope this national and regional visibility will make Vanderbilt recognized as a venue for progressive thinking about eco-spiritual issues and regional problems and solutions.

### **Outreach to religious congregations in Nashville and surrounding communities**

Our project's ultimate goal is to identify ways to translate academic insights and progressive environmental policy into ideas and language accessible to a broad American public. At the beginning of our second year, we will initiate an outreach project with local religious congregations (churches, synagogues, mosques, temples). Based on the work of our first seminar on contemporary religions as resources for promoting environmentalism, we will put together a public presentation and educational resource materials about effective approaches and projects undertaken by religious groups around the world. This presentation (and our website's links) will highlight models for practical, creative ways that religious congregations can use their land and human and organizational resources to promote healthier local environments and environmental

practices. Some project members will take this presentation into various local congregations, in hope of sparking interest and excitement about possibilities for such initiatives. Ideally, we would like to see this outreach effort evolve into a community initiative that brings diverse congregations and interest groups together to identify common ground, shared concerns, and ways to work together.

A particular concern is to get past the usual ghetto-izing of environmentalism as a white, upper-middle class concern. Low-income and inner-city neighborhoods have some of the worst problems with toxic waste, pollution, litter, and environmentally-related health conditions such as asthma and other respiratory ailments. We plan to work especially with local groups such as EarthMatters/Tennessee, which has developed extensive contacts, community projects, organic gardens and mulching sites working with members of the African-American community, Fisk University, and Tennessee State University.