A new study published in the *Journal for Religion, Nature and Culture* explores how religion can play a positive role in encouraging conservation behavior. The study focused on a congregation’s shared sense of connection to their church and local community. By targeting the congregation’s sense of place—the meanings and emotions people associate with a particular place—outreach campaigns geared toward a faith-based audience may inspire participants to care for their local environment.

“Research has already shown that the meanings we associate with places that are special to us can be motivating factors to protect that place. Most of this research has focused on natural places, but our study provides evidence that these findings can be extended to the environment where one’s place of worship resides,” said Jenny Seifert, lead author of the study and science writer and outreach coordinator for the Water Sustainability and Climate Project at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The study examined the impact of a conservation outreach program designed to encourage environmentally responsible behavior among members of a faith-based community. The program used scripturally based messages and targeted the congregation’s sense of place by focusing their motivations on their church and surrounding community. Most participants said the program increased their awareness of their role in caring for the environment, and many adopted new environmentally friendly behaviors.

“Churches are influential sources of social mobilization in the United States, and working with them to promote conservation behaviors in their own communities is one important way to broaden public interest in protecting their environment,” said study co-author Bret Shaw, environmental communication specialist for UW-Extension and associate professor in the Department of Life Sciences Communication at UW-Madison.

Seifert and Shaw believe the program was effective because it addressed participants’ existing belief systems, which previous research has shown are among the strongest determinants of environment-related attitudes and behavior, in combination with the focus on place. They suggest this emphasis on place increases the relevancy and need to care for the environment.

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