



Stephen's Healthy Housing Column

Healthy and Sacred Spaces

Stephen Collette, BBEC, LEED AP

Stephen Collette is a Certified Building Biology Environmental Consultant (BBEC). This lengthy certification analyses the built environment and how it impacts people's health. Stephen was a natural builder for 5 years specializing in straw bale construction. Stephen has an engineering background and training which enables him to understand the various processes occurring within the home and how they can interact. Applying these skills and knowledge to the standard home and small office enables Your Healthy House to find the reasons for poor indoor air quality and to create solutions to help create your healthy house.

Stephen Collette is a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design - Accredited Professional (LEED AP), which allows Stephen to use the Canada Green Building Council's guidelines and method to ensure a quantitative approach to building

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Our desire to express our religious beliefs and carry out rituals defines us as a species. To come together in sacred spaces and share in the magic of the universe with others who share the same belief is how communities are built. But what if being in that nurturing space made you sick? What if there was something so toxic to you that you would become ill in that space and it became inaccessible to you? Would that be something a community would want to resolve?

People diagnosed with environmental sensitivities actually equal the number of people in Ontario with mobility disabilities at 6%. As good community stewards we spend large amounts of money to make our sacred spaces mobility barrier free (as we should). No person should be denied access to a sacred space to express their beliefs,

yet it happens regularly for those with chemical sensitivities. Understanding how faith communities can help is easy, and so is the ability to open your doors to a greater community.

Environmental sensitivities are a recognized disability according to the Ontarians with Disabilities Act. This is the act that looks at how to make spaces accessible to all Ontarians. Chemical sensitivities are a one form of environmental illness and it is a biological reaction to the toxicological exposure to volatile chemicals. The body's immune system is unable to handle and process these toxins as most people can. The result is typically respiratory and neurological impacts affecting the individual enough that they must seek refuge elsewhere and may take days to recover.



MCSA NEWS

“Cleaning products are so toxic that many come with hazardous warnings on them.”

The causes of such terrible events are the chemicals we use in our everyday lives. Perfumes, cleaning products, solvents, caulking, glues, and pesticides are just a short list. It is mainly petroleum based products as they are highly volatile, which means that they off gas fumes. Think of perfume. It contains approximately 75-100 volatile organic compounds (petroleum products) whose job is to off gas enough to numb the brains of the one’s you are trying to attract. That unfortunately is really what is happening!

Cleaning products are so toxic that many come with hazardous warnings on them. If we were to sit back and consider this idea, it’s unimaginable that we would consider using these products with such toxic warnings. Of course one says, well it hasn’t killed me yet. That is unfortunately only partially true. Cancer rates are the highest in our history. Asthma rates in children have more than doubled since the 1980’s and children with allergies has

skyrocketed as well. We are seeing childhood cancer rates manifest younger and younger. This is because we now know that these toxic chemicals that we use daily are actually passing through the placenta during pregnancy and impacting the fetus and it’s development. Our children are growing up with a weaker immune system because of the exposures we have had in our lifetimes and unknowingly exposed them to.

So how do we make changes? Scent free spaces are the first step in showing your fellow community member that they too are important in your sacred space. Scent free means no perfumes, or scented fabric softeners on your clothes. This is easily achievable and will dramatically open the doors to more people. There are many organizations, companies, jurisdictions, and faith communities that have done so already, and finding them for resources is only a web search away.



Cleaning products have a massive impact, both on the users in the faith community and those in the space. Highly volatile and toxic cleaning products are simply not necessary for most of the cleaning required in a faith community. Kitchen spaces used do require a certain level of cleanliness as public health dictates. There are a few cleaning products available that are significantly safer than chlorine bleach (chlorine gas was used in World War One as a nerve agent) such as essential oil of thyme based products and hydrogen peroxide based products. The products with a Health Canada certification can be used in place of bleach for food preparation spaces. Also remember that hot water is an acceptable solution as well according to the guidelines. Talk to your public health inspector on healthier options and they may have solutions that others in your area have used. Share with your Greening Sacred Spaces network as well about what you have learned. Educate your own people. Many times older members will use a toxic product because they always have. That doesn't make it safe, just ill informed. No one wants to hurt others with something as simple and inexpensive as cleaning products, so educate and change. If you are getting your supplies from a cleaning company, ask them for better solutions. You can even make your own recipes with baking soda and vinegar, which is something multi-generational activities are all about. The best part about switching cleaning products to more natural based ones is that it is typically cheaper, so saving money, the environment (less toxins down the drain) and making the place healthier for others is a great solution.

For some faith communities the burning of candles or incense is common. Candles are typically



made from paraffin, which is petroleum, with more petroleum products to give color and smell, with a lead dipped wick to finish it off. Consider the dark black smoke that rises when you blow a candle out. Have you ever seen a transport truck pull away from the corner and the same dark black smoke? It's the same thing. Switch to bees-wax or soy based candles for a healthier option. Incense can be a sensitizer and using the higher quality incense can help, as there are many toxic additives in the cheaper kinds that could cause a reaction. Ideally there may be times or parts of the space that incense is not burned so that those with sensitivities can still attend and not be impacted.

There will still be people who are more sensitive and these measures may not be enough. Solutions can be found for those communities who are inclusive and interested in reaching out to their congregation, ensuring every one of their members have the ability to attend and share in their sacred community.

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