

## Congregation Beth Shalom: A Multi-year Tale of Energy Conservation

Per cent of households achieving the 14% goal:	35%
Average reduction by those households:	22%
Reduction in natural gas use:	61%
Reduction in electricity use:	25%

As early as 2005, on the initiative of the board president, members of Congregation Beth Shalom sought to engage the congregation to conserve energy. Transforming this desire into congregation-wide action took several years. It required three things: commitments by the board and individual members to specific goals, information on how these might be achieved, and effective engagement of the community. All of this required a dedicated team.

Beth Shalom's energy work was initiated by its board president and several congregants who had taken part in a workshop to decrease household energy consumption. Based on the *Low Carbon Diet* workbook, the workshop gave participants a shared understanding of how to cut energy use and experience doing so.

Initially, two mechanisms provided goals for action. First, in 2008, a small newly-formed creation care team asked for board authorization to develop a plan to reduce the congregation's energy use by a large percentage within five years. This was easily approved because all actions had to be approved first by the building committee and then by the board. The team reduced the congregation's energy use by modestly adjusting building temperatures when the building was empty, sealing small cracks in the ceiling, installing energy-efficient light bulbs, and removing some fluorescent tubes. Without a sense of ownership by the board, however, a fuller plan met resistance.

Second - and more successful because of its awareness-raising component, in 2009, the team promoted a household energy conservation pledge, which committed the signer to trying to reduce his or her home energy use by 10-20% in the following year. Between August and January, a third of Beth Shalom's households signed the pledge, a major feat resulting from intense and strategic outreach. First, the rabbi and receptive board members were asked to sign, followed by the entire board. Then, on erev Rosh Hashana, the pledge was placed on each seat in the sanctuary and was promoted from the bima. An envelope for returned pledges was tacked to an eye-catching bulletin board - newly dedicated to the congregation's creation care work - near an entry to the building. The bulletin board and monthly newsletters reported on the percentage of households that had signed. And the team personally asked members to sign on.



Hanukka celebration



Above all, a milestone in congregational awareness occurred during Hanukkah that year, when the team planned an event that was immensely successful. Congregants were invited to a latke dinner with a program comprising an engaging film excerpt, the Hanukkah blessings and songs, and a moderated discussion at each of the many tables, asking members to discuss what they thought needed to be done and to report its conclusions to the whole group. A story with photos of the gathering ran on the religion page of the local paper. Crucial to the event's power was the large number of participants. As well as inviting the community as a whole, the team contacted members individually, and arranged simultaneous children's programming so that parents could participate.



Yet, well-intentioned congregants still lacked specific guidance on what to do. This changed when the social action and creation care team jointly supported the congregation implementing the Task of the

Month program as their focus for the year beginning in September, 2010. Task of the Month encourages congregants to change their energy use one step at a time, sealing exterior cracks one month, a programmable thermostat another, and so on. The program was publicized on the creation care bulletin board, by a table at the annual multicultural fair, in a playful rendition of Adon Olam at the end of services, and in the monthly newsletter. Members were offered the help of a team of youth, who were trained to perform a number of the tasks. With the aid of a small lockbox, discounted energy-efficient light bulbs were available for purchase at any time – and were sold at the monthly retirees lunch. Through this web of communication and support, energy conservation became part of Beth Shalom’s culture.

Meanwhile, Beth Shalomers participated in the March 2011 inaugural founding of Hoosier Interfaith Power and Light, with religious groups from all over the state meeting in Indianapolis to launch the group. This and other contacts with other Hoosiers of faith who shared the creation care team’s concern energized the Beth Shalom team.

By October 2011 a third of Beth Shalom members had reduced their energy use by a seventh, an achievement that was celebrated with a festive Sukkot potluck. By the end of December, our congregation had applied for and won the Cool Congregation challenge grant competition sponsored by the national Interfaith Power and Light, naming us the congregation that had most inspired its members to reduce their household energy consumption. We were awarded \$1000 and made the national news.

All of this was accomplished with a good deal of persistence that was not welcomed by some congregants, who were uncomfortable being asked to change and to commit themselves by a pledge to doing so. But the more people learned that others were pledging and taking steps to change their habits, the more attitudes seemed to change.

In 2012, under the aegis of Hoosier Interfaith Power & Light, Beth Shalom joined with five other congregations to apply for a grant for solar panels from the Indiana Office of Energy Development. In order to apply, Beth Shalom’s board had to approve a plan to reduce its energy use by at least 25% - independent of the solar panels – and contribute financially to the purchase of the panels. Forty-three households contributed by signing up for Energizing Indiana’s free energy assessment program, which earned \$25 per household to be used for the panels. The creation care team developed and the board approved a plan that would cost \$3800 to achieve the targeted reduction. Informed by an energy audit that found few structural sources of energy loss, the plan focused on greatly reducing the heating and cooling of parts of the building when they were vacant, using simple technologies to turn lights off when not in use, choosing high-efficiency equipment when HVAC units needed replacing, and upgrading some lighting to higher-efficiency alternatives.

Bound by this commitment and with a plan and budget in hand, the team worked intensively, researching and presenting options and reviewing building use with staff and leaders to get buy-in to more energy-savings thermostat settings. Overcoming resistance to new ways of thinking about energy use – that we can and should light, heat and cool people not empty spaces – proved challenging. Nevertheless, just 14 months after it undertook the commitment to reduce its energy use by 25%, the congregation is a hair’s breadth from achieving this goal. It sports solar panels on its roof. Over a third of its members have reduced their energy use by at least a seventh. And, most important, energy conservation is part of the synagogue’s culture.



Orienting the interfaith youth energy conservation team



Youth weatherizing a retiree’s home



Energy-efficient light bulbs for sale