

Ind. congregations get grants for solar panels

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BLOOMINGTON, Ind. (AP) — Four Bloomington faith congregations will become sources of power and light, thanks to a \$150,000 grant for solar panel installations.

The grant was awarded to Hoosier Interfaith Power and Light, an umbrella organization whose mission is to "call together Hoosiers of faith as stewards of creation in order to promote energy conservation, energy efficiency, renewable energy and related sustainable practices."

About 140 congregations of Catholics, mainstream and evangelical Protestants, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists across Indiana are active with HIPL and are tackling climate change as a matter of stewardship.

"For leaders of this range of faith traditions to work so closely together is rare and speaks to their recognition that their faiths share the urgent moral call to action to help curb climate change," said Madi Hirschland, a member of Congregation Beth Shalom and vice chairwoman of HIPL's board of directors.

"To curb climate change, we need to come together and act right now, and that's what happened" in winning the grant, she told The Herald-Times (<http://www.heraldtimesonline.com/>).

"Energy conservation is the quickest and the most potent way that we can reduce our heat-trapping emissions. It's easy to cut by a lot — and it's in our own hands," she said.

Six congregations have demonstrated their commitment to reducing energy use and otherwise jumped through necessary hoops to qualify for installation of the photovoltaic — solar electric generating — panels: Congregation Beth Shalom, St. Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Trinity Episcopal Church, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington and two churches in Indianapolis.

"A goodly number of hoops," said the Rev. Lyle McKee, of St. Thomas Lutheran Church, who is chairman of HIPL's board.

McKee called climate change "the most pressing moral issue of our time."

"It will be an increasingly problematic issue unless we do something to replace our use of fossil fuels," he said.

"Every denomination and faith group of which I am aware has a pretty forthright statement of taking care of God's good creation, from whatever perspective that comes," McKee said. "Most of those documents talk about care and compassion for all that God has made. Usually, there's a reference of the importance of stewardship of those resources that are precious and limited. Many, including the Lutheran, point out the disproportionate effect of climate change on the poor and those without resources."

"For me, it's an important thing to model what we believe," said Rev. Mary Ann Macklin, co-minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church, "to walk our talk on this Earth."

McKee said St. Thomas has already reduced energy use by 30 percent in its facilities in the past three years. The new solar panels will power 55 to 60 percent of its current electrical use. The congregation intends to continue upping its conservation efforts, though, so the solar power could power 75 percent of the church's energy use.

The grant money will be divided equally among the six congregations, but the solar installations will vary based on the buy-in from members. The state office considers outside leverage and financial commitment in awarding grants.

The six faith communities have committed to cutting energy use by at least 25 percent within the church, synagogue or temple, and at least one-third of the members of each have committed to cutting their energy by at least one-seventh.

"On the seventh day, God rested," McKee said in explaining HIPL's Seventh Day Initiative, which encourages participants to reduce household energy use by at least one-seventh.

More than half of St. Thomas' members have pledged to cut their energy use by at least one-seventh, and a third have already accomplished that.

"That defines us as a Seventh Day congregation," he said.

The grant will also fund Using Energy Prudently workshops to help other faith communities become better stewards of the environment.

"Congregations active with HIPL are going to be taking their experience in how to do this to congregations all across the state," Hirschland said. The workshops planned for 10 locations aim to reach 225 congregations with about 27,000 members.

"This will help us cut and replace coal-fired energy," McKee said, noting that Indiana is one of the most coal-dependent states in the country.

"Our hope is we reach thousands of folks, so we won't need Edwardsport or Rockport," two coal-fired power plants in Indiana, McKee said. "We can reduce the demand for coal. It's that kind of vision."

Once installed, the six congregations' solar panels will produce 107,600 kilowatt hours annually, and reduce demand for coal by even more, since the congregations have already undertaken energy conservation plans. Using the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's carbon calculator, that converts to 107,604 pounds of carbon emissions averted.

"Our hope is to engage the majority of Bloomington's congregations in this significant energy conservation initiative," Hirschland said.

The federally funded Community Conservation Challenge grant comes from the Indiana Department of Energy's Office of Energy Development, the agency that paid for the solar panels on the North Showers County Government Center and energy-consumption monitors there and at three local schools, as part of Monroe County's Leaders of Today, Leaders of Tomorrow Energy Challenge.

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Online:

Hoosier Interfaith Power and Light's Seventh Day Initiative: www.hoosieripl.org

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Information from: The Herald Times, <http://www.heraldtimesonline.com>

