

Saving energy at 3 area churches

Rosa Salter Rodriguez The Journal Gazette



Many pastors urge their flocks to look to the heavens for spiritual power.

Now, three Fort Wayne congregations will also look there for electrical power.

The three – Plymouth Congregational Church-United Church of Christ, Beacon Heights Church of the Brethren and Turner Chapel-AME Church – have each won grants of at least \$20,000 to install electricity-generating solar panels on their rooftops.

The grants, among nine recently awarded across Indiana, are part of an energy conservation effort spearheaded by the Seventh-Day Initiative of Hoosier Interfaith Power & Light, a statewide nonprofit coalition. One of 40 such groups nationwide, Hoosier Interfaith has been charged with distributing money to religious institutions from a legal settlement American Electric Power struck with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, eight states and 13 citizens' groups.

The settlement requires AEP to stop burning coal at three power plants by next year and invest \$2.5 million in alternative energy projects to reduce air pollution in Indiana. AEP is the parent company of Indiana Michigan Power, which serves the greater Fort Wayne area.

To get a grant, congregations had to commit to reducing their energy use by 25 percent and help a third of members cut their home use by one-seventh, says Madeline Hirschland, director of the Seventh-Day Initiative. Congregations also are required to invest some of their own money in energy conservation, she says.

“They're very deep cuts. But what we have found is that they (congregations) are able to do it,” Hirschland says, noting six previous grant awardees in other parts of the state have had little difficulty in reaching the goals.

“It's actually pretty easy, and once someone really understands, they jump for it,” Hirschland says.

At Plymouth Congregational, the solar panels should be installed by the end of the year, says David Bayle of Fort Wayne, chairman of the congregation's solar task force. He says the installation on the church's education building should save the congregation at 501 W. Berry St. about \$1,800 a year in electricity costs.

That's equivalent to one month's bill, he says.

Indeed, Bayle says, the solar panels should generate more electricity than needed, allowing the congregation to use less power-company-generated electricity during higher-priced peak hours and, in effect, sell excess power back to the utility.

The congregation plans to spend the savings on additional energy upgrades, including insulating its water heater, installing motion sensors on lighting and perhaps buying a higher-efficiency furnace, he says.

At Beacon Heights, the solar panels should blend easily into the architecture of its mid-20th-century modern building, says the Rev. Brian Flory. The congregation at 2810 Beacon St. already had been investigating several ways of reducing energy use, including installing a geothermal heating system, but found it wasn't feasible for the size of its lot, he says.

“When we were approached about solar, we started looking at our roof, which is south-facing, and the angle of the pitch, 30 (degrees) to 35 degrees, is perfect – not too steep and not too flat. So from a structural standpoint of our building, it worked out perfectly,” Flory says.

“We hope it will be a nice aesthetic and just another extension of what we believe in. Having solar panels on the roof will send a message. We're a congregation that strongly believes in the stewardship of God's creation. That's a value we see repeated over and over again in the Bible.”

Neither congregation had difficulty getting members to fill out a required survey about their home energy use.

“A lot of our congregation was much more energy-conscious than the average Hoosier, so that was interesting to see, and we were given a lot of small steps to take to make things better,” says Laura Rudolph, congregation moderator for Plymouth Congregational, designated a green congregation under a program endorsed by Mayor Tom Henry in 2010.

Hirschland says religious bodies make good candidates for energy savings because many have older buildings that haven't been updated and feature large spaces that go unoccupied for periods of time. So far, Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Unitarian-Universalist congregations have been awarded grants for improving their energy use.

Hoosier Interfaith is still recruiting congregations that would like to participate in the Seventh-Day Initiative, and three more grants are available for congregations in the Indiana Michigan Power service area, Hirschland says.

Information about applying is available by emailing info@seventhdayinitiatives.org.

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