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Solar power: Let the sunshine in

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Mission Management

The ?environmental crisis,? we are reminded, is a ?moral challenge? that requires us ?to examine how we use and share the goods of the earth, what we pass on to future generations, and how we live in harmony with God?s creation.?

Just the latest environmental pabulum from the trendy religious left? Hardly. Those words were promulgated by the U.S. bishops in their 1991 statement ?Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching.?

Nearly two decades later, has the church embraced its own teaching?

The San Jose, Calif., diocese certainly has. In February 2009, Bishop Patrick McGrath launched the Catholic Green Initiative of Santa Clara County, an effort involving the diocese, Catholic Charities, Santa Clara University and the Presentation Retreat and Conference Center.

To kick things off, the diocese organized a town hall gathering of 100 leaders to commit ?to action determined by the collective voice of this group.? The human energy in the room that day, said Lindsey Cromwell, sustainability coordinator at Jesuit Santa Clara University, was palpable.

Among the results, Santa Clara University students are creating educational materials for diocesan use and will undertake a greenhouse gas inventory of the diocese. The university has some experience in the field, having conducted a greenhouse gas analysis for Baltimore-based Catholic Relief Services.

Meanwhile, amid efforts to promote energy and water conservation, solar-powered parishes are a focus. Five San Jose parishes -- Holy Spirit, Holy Family, St. Christopher, Queen of the Apostles and St. Lucy -- plus Gate of Heaven Cemetery in Los Altos are participating in the diocese?s solar energy initiative.

Solar panels will be placed on rooftops, parking lots and in open, unused acreage at the cemetery. ?The

diocese?s solar installations are high quality and designed to provide clean energy for over 30 years,? said Reid Rutherford, founder and CEO of Photon Energy Services, the vendor for the solar project.

?Phase one of the installation begins this month and will continue through the early summer. Once complete, the systems will generate enough electricity to provide approximately 70 percent of each site?s collective electrical needs,? said Rutherford.

?Over the life of the system, the six sites will eliminate approximately 19,000 tons of [carbon dioxide]. That is equivalent to planting 345 acres of trees or removing 4,740 cars from the road for one year,? explained Dustin Keele, Photon?s executive vice president.

The technology for the project, said Keele, is readily available. The tricky part is paying for it. ?It?s not so much about available technology, but rather, financial technology -- or the manner in which solar power can be financed,? he said.

To deliver the solar energy system without upfront cost to the diocese, Photon partnered with an independent power producer, Perpetual Energy Systems, a Chicago-based firm, which paid for the solar equipment and will sell the diocese the power it produces under a 25-year solar services agreement. ?We anticipate that this agreement will result in significant financial savings for the diocese over the next 25 years,? explained Keele.

?During the agreement term, the diocese will benefit from the use of solar renewable energy while Perpetual Energy Systems retains ownership of the system as well as the renewable energy certificates and carbon credits,? said Mike Maley, president and CEO of Perpetual.

Looking at the big picture, Santa Clara University?s Cromwell points out, ?The Catholic Green Initiative fits well within the larger issue of sustainability, which includes issues of equity, economics and the environment.?

The San Jose diocese gets the message -- and is doing something about it.

Tom Gallagher is a regular contributor to NCR. *Ideas for a ?Mission Management? story? Contact him at* tom@tomgallagheronline.com.

Church greening resources

The U.S. bishops' "Renewing the Earth"
www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/bishopsstatement.shtml

Sustainability at Santa Clara University
www.scu.edu/sustainability

Photon Energy Services
www.photonenergyservices.com

Perpetual Energy System
www.goperpetual.com

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