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'Cool congregations': The Interfaith Power & Light story, part 2

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Eco Catholic

Energy Audits and Portfolio Management

For a number of years, when a congregation joined Michigan Interfaith Power & Light (MiIPL), we provided an energy assessment of their facility conducted by a professional. The congregation now had a baseline that indicated how well their facility was performing in its energy use compared to other buildings from a similar climate and similar use.

We would provide both the report and an evening of energy education to the congregational staff and members that shared where their 'low-hanging fruit' lies.

MiIPL and other IPLs across the country have partnered with EPA's ENERGY STAR® for Congregations program [www.energystar.gov/congregations] in making ENERGY STAR's Workbook for Congregations available to members. There is a wonderful manual at the ENERGY STAR for Congregations website, Putting Energy Into Stewardship, that is invaluable for congregations who are committed to lowering their use of fossil fuel energy.

In recent years IPLs such as MiIPL have taken advantage of ENERGY STAR's Portfolio Management Database program. In webinar trainings a congregation's office manager learns how to enter its utility bills and, when energy efficient measures or onsite renewables are installed the parish can see in real time the energy saved and carbon emissions offset. For example, when my parish of St. Elizabeth in Wyandotte installed a simple programmable thermostat and tweaked its boiler pressure the Portfolio Manager indicated that it had reduced its gas consumption by 11 percent in 11 months and kept 29,000 lbs. of CO₂ from entering the atmosphere.

Over a five year period, MiIPL congregations in the aggregate offset at least 500 tons/year of carbon emissions.

Business Partnerships and Shopping Cart

Michigan IPL has not shied away from forging strategic partnerships with green businesses. A Michigan retailer, ABC Warehouse, provides a discount of up to 20% over retail to any congregant who is a member of MiIPL congregation. For retailers such as Sears the IPL provides entrée into a new market in exchange for significant savings for congregants.

A few years ago, in partnership with Technical Consumer Products, a very large and respected commercial lighting manufacturer, MiIPL offered an online shopping cart to members. The National IPL has expanded the shopping cart to a national audience with discounts on energy efficient products ranging from lighting to weather-stripping.

Advocacy

When the National Interfaith Power & Light leadership team was approached by the 11th Hour Project in 2006 trying to find a venue for the showing of An Inconvenient Truth to a larger audience than just those who would plunk out cash for a theatrical showing the National IPL, in coordination with the State representatives, were able to arrange a showing in over 4,000 houses of worship across the country.

For the past few years there has been a Preach-In across the country on climate change around Valentine's Day coupled with a legislative outreach.

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In my own state I have visited every office of the State House with educational material in advocacy of a Feed-In Tariff for Michigan and have given energy workshops in partnership with State Senators in their home district.

Conferences and Workshops

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The National Interfaith Power & Light is not organized as a top down organization. Some state IPLs are organized as a steering committee under the umbrella of another organization. Michigan IPL became incorporated as its own 501(c)(3) in 2003. The states do gather together each spring in Washington, where best practices are shared, advocacy can be coordinated and leading experts in climate science and in the faith community share their wisdom.

MiIPL, for most of its history, has hosted a Statewide Sustainability Conference. This year's conference will be co-sponsored by Aquinas College on Aquinas' campus in Grand Rapids on Wednesday, October 5. There will be breakouts on diverse topics as lighting for houses of worship, how to build a rain garden, and how the faith community can make its voice heard both in the halls of Lansing and in Washington [for more information go to www.miipl.org].

Future Endeavors

The Regeneration Project [www.theregenerationproject.org] serves as the umbrella for the National Interfaith Power & Light movement. But Rev. Sally Bingham envisions the voice of the faith in addressing creation care to be broader than energy and climate. In the past year The Regeneration Project

has launched a Cool Harvest Campaign to address the interplay between the faith community and food justice. They have produced a program that congregations can use to educate themselves on this issue. This will be expanded in the future.

In Michigan we are putting together another partnership where green businesses will pay houses of worship for the renewable energy they produce from solar panels on those houses of worship.

Catholic Impact on the Interfaith Power & Light Movement

Although the Interfaith Power & Light movement was birthed through the Episcopal church Roman Catholic involvement has been significant. Sr. Joan Brown, a well-known Franciscan in the sustainability arena, is one of the leading architects of New Mexico Interfaith Power & Light. Sr. Paula Gonzalez, a Sister of Charity and a pioneer in the eco-justice movement, was one of the organizers of Ohio Interfaith Power & Light. In Michigan, over 25 percent of all congregations that have been part of the Interfaith Power & Light movement are Roman Catholic, the largest denominational grouping.

Seven Blessings

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As I state, when I give presentations on the Interfaith Power & Light movement I point out seven blessings which characterize the IPL vision:

1. *Stewardship* ? Energy audits and swapping out light bulbs demonstrate to the congregation that the church is husbanding their resources wisely.
2. *Justice* ? Every dollar saved on energy is a dollar that one can direct toward your parish's mission: feeding a hungry person, paying a just salary, etc.
3. *Equity* ? Congregations in the inner-city and in rural areas have the fewest resources coming in, have the greatest need at their front doors and they tend to inhabit the oldest, most energy inefficient buildings. By helping to weatherize those buildings and provide discounts on lighting the Interfaith Power & Light collaborative can be a lifesaver to ongoing viability of the important Gospel witness these congregations provide
4. *Health* ? By the increase of more natural light, by the elimination of toxic paints and pesticides, and by the promotion of more organic, locally grown foods congregations provide a healthier environment for all of their members.
5. *Interfaith* ? The Interfaith Power & Light movement relies on a shared wisdom, collaborative model. ?We all breathe the same air?, President Kennedy said. MiIPL's Board includes: an Imam, a nun, two Jews, an Episcopalian and a Unitarian Universalist. Climate justice is an area that powerfully lends itself to a true Ecumenical spirit.
6. *Security* ? With a model of distributed generation of energy, lower carbon footprint and renewable energy the Interfaith Power & Light vision points to a different model of security and helps us to break our addiction to fossil fuel, which brings such harm to God's good earth and to future generations, and pulls us out of the peak oil conundrum.
7. *Prophetic* ? Not only does the Interfaith Power & Light movement ?talk the talk? with reference to addressing the very real challenge of global climate change of whose impacts we are now just beginning to feel. It ?walks the walk? in terms of developing strategic partnerships with government and business, and by reducing its own ecological footprint.

Enlightened businesses talk about the Triple Bottom Line ? environmental stewardship, social equity and economic growth. The Interfaith Power & Light movement is seeking to embody those values among the faith community. In the words of Jesus: ?Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves? [Matt. 10:16] No more apt description can sum up this

essential mission as we continue to discern the 'signs of the times'. [Matt. 16:3]

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