

CALIFORNIA: Solar power installation a success story for Walnut Creek parish

By Phina Borgeson
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With solar power at St. Paul's Church in Walnut Creek, California, now on line, the Rev. M. Sylvia O. Vasquez reminded her parishioners that they are making an immediate impact on the environment.

The project's peak power capacity of 23 kilowatts provides nearly all the electricity for the main church buildings. And while there will be no immediate savings to the parish, none of the \$187,000 cost for the 135 solar panel installation has been born by the parish budget.

David Mattern, chair of the environmental committee at St. Paul's, proposed forming a limited liability company which could take advantage of federal tax credits available for solar power systems. "The best thing about the project," from the perspective of Mattern, a civil engineer also skilled in tax preparation, "is that our idea for financing worked."

Sonlight Solar LLC, as it came to be called, can also take advantage of state incentives and other tax benefits. Initially the church will pay Sonlight for the power generated. Sonlight, from benefits and income, will pay for about half the initial system cost.

The rest of the principal needed was raised by taking bids for loans from parishioners and friends of the parish. Those wishing to bid completed a form stating how much they would like to loan, when they wanted it repaid, and the rate of interest they would like.

"We averaged around 5% on the bids we accepted," says Mattern. "That's better for our investors than they would get on a savings account, but less than the 7.75% we were offered by the Episcopal Church Foundation at the time."

"The parish should begin saving money on the cost of energy in 10 years or less," said Vasquez.

"And then the savings should continue for another 20 years or so," added Mattern, who hopes St. Paul's can inspire other congregations to use this model for funding.

"We hope light bulbs will go on over heads all around the church," quips Vasquez.

Vasquez recalls moving into her office, before her December 2006 start as rector, and finding herself musing about how to persuade the congregation to consider a solar installation. She became aware of a meeting going on in an adjacent room. "I popped my head in to say hello, and discovered that they were the environmental committee plotting how they could convince me."

St. Paul's had considered a solar installation five or six years before, but enthusiasm had faded. Hosting a showing of the Al Gore movie "An Inconvenient Truth" in October of 2006 got members thinking again about what they might do.

Vasquez found that while the Diocese of California offered encouragement, only one other parish, St. Anselm's in Lafayette, California, had a solar installation, and there was no organized program in place.

Mattern's financing idea then came into play. It was not easy to explain why and how a company would work, but the more Mattern explained it, the more people caught on, until a broad base of support and agreement had been developed.

The congregation was able to capture the vision of immediate environmental impact and future economic benefit to the congregation.

"I would urge any congregation attempting such a major project to make sure there is a broad base of agreement," says Vasquez.

While Mattern developed the explanation of the financial strategy, Vasquez preached about responsibility for the environment. "The rationale must be theological," she insists.

An added benefit of St. Paul's switch to solar was providing experience for participants in SolarRichmond, a training program for underemployed workers. When risers were erected on the office wing roof and the solar panels mounted on them, interns from SolarRichmond worked side by side with more experienced installers from Real Goods, project contractor.

"When we were weighing the decision, many people on the vestry and committee were concerned about the bottom line, but many others were excited about the additional benefit of working with a program that would benefit people as well. In the end we got both," says Vasquez.

Michele McGeoy, director of SolarRichmond, explains: "When I left my work in the computer industry, I started a non-profit to deal with the digital divide. When I moved into the solar industry, I became aware of the eco-divide."

Richmond, California, where the project is based, identifies itself as The City of Pride and Purpose, but "with Chevron in our back yard, and a ranking of the ninth most dangerous city in the United States, we are more often seen as the city of pollution and violence," notes McGeoy.

"Solar is an antidote for pollution, and jobs are an antidote for violence," she points out.

"SolarRichmond functions like a temporary agency in a way," McGeoy explains.

"We've trained about 40 people in the last two years, but we also help with placements that help workers entering the solar industry build their resumes."

Now that solar power is finally on line, says Vasquez, the Environmental Committee at St. Paul's can turn to a broader range of projects. Recycling is already in place, and parish events use real crockery whenever possible.

When it isn't, they use compostables.

"Now we compost through the efforts of members," says Vasquez, "but we have plans to compost on site." One of St. Paul's many ministries is a program with homeless people, Fresh Start, based in their Fellowship House. "They will be developing an herb garden which includes parish composting."