

# One Congregation's Path to Going Solar

Rev. Andy Bell, SSIPL Board Chairman

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Lakewood United Methodist in Saint Petersburg is now within a matter of days of switching on their 50 panel solar array but the journey to this point started a while back.

When I was asked to take over as the director of the Lakewood Methodist Counseling Center it was an easy transition into the life of this engaged and diverse church family. There has been a monthly ritual of the Second Sunday Lunch bunch going on for years before I joined this group. Almost immediately the question had to be asked, "If we have this great kitchen facility with cupboards full of dishes and glasses, why are we using all of this Styrofoam and plastic?" A typical Lunch Bunch would culminate with five or so large bags of disposable plates, cups, knives, forks, plastic table "cloths," etc, etc. My beloved brothers and sisters were rather puzzled by such a question. Over the years LUMC has become an "older" congregation as is common for many churches these days, and over time, as I was told, "it's just easier." So what does a few bags of disposable plastics have to do with a congregation installing solar panels? Well, a lot actually.

It was quickly apparent, like too many congregations, that somehow this community had either lost touch with or never learned of the deep, rich faith traditions, scriptures, and teachings that require us to be benevolent caretakers of God's beloved Earth. So began the process of talking about, engaging, inviting open-hearted people together to figure out all the ways we could be those Creation Care stewards we have been called to be.

I was told that using plates and glasses was just too much work but if I wanted to do it I was welcome. Let me just say the obvious, change is often difficult for our species and usually more so if religion is involved. Over time doing dishes after lunch has moved from chore to a wonderful fellowship time with lots of folks coming and going, washing, drying, stacking, wiping counter tops, all the while sharing jokes, stories, news, and on rare occasion the tiniest bit of gossip. Now, on average, there is less than half a bag of waste that goes to the dumpster to either be incinerated or live forever in a landfill while the extra time for bonding and connecting with each other has significantly

increased.

A quick word about landfills, dumps, and “waste to energy” facilities more commonly known as incinerators: whenever we talk about throwing things away, we have to realize there is no such place as “away.” It is here. It is God’s planet we call Earth, our tiny life support system. The atmosphere we like to use as a sewer for incinerator, tailpipe, industrial and other emissions? That is God’s too. To paraphrase Rev. Fletcher Harper of Greenfaith, if we know God created everything in Love then we certainly know it was never intended to be thrown into a landfill.

A lot of the congregants already had a heart for the environment but had never connected it with their faith. For most that has been a very easy connection.

Over the years since there has been a greater awareness of the impact we have on all creation with almost everything we do at church and in our homes and workplaces as well. We started with basic energy conservation, turning off lights, turning up the air conditioners during the summer and heat down in winter - and just plain off whenever possible, which is very possible for several months of the year. Energy sucking incandescent bulbs were replaced with CFL’s and are now being replaced with long life LED’s. T12 fluorescent fixtures continue to be replaced with T8’s. Trustees have had energy audits performed on all buildings. Insulation, energy efficiency, energy star ratings, water conservation, recycling, consuming less, using less, low/no toxicity chemicals and cleaning products are always considered when changes are made and remodeling done.

In recent years the annual Festival of God’s Creation Sunday has been celebrated at Lakewood with more frequent references to Creation Care in weekly sermons. No longer is being green considered “Andy’s thing,” now it is part of Lakewood’s faith identity. We love Earth because God loves all of Creation and calls us to do likewise.

So, back to the solar array. Through conservation we keep energy use as low as possible while still performing as many ministries as possible including two schools on campus. This gives us more bang for the buck when adding solar to create our own clean, sustainable, renewable electricity. The less energy we use the fewer panels we will eventually need to have a net zero carbon impact. Speaking of bucks, the primary

reason many congregations have shied away from solar in the past, solar is now less expensive than electricity created by burning coal, a primary source of green house gas and toxic emissions. Over the last five years or so the cost of solar panels has plummeted worldwide. The cost is no longer a viable excuse to not execute a plan to install solar for electricity generation.

Depending on one's belief system it was divine intervention, fate, timing, great luck, or a combination of all that lead to a conversation with solar engineer Alan Brand, owner of The Solar Shepherd. Alan, a man of deep faith understands that global climate change is the single most important moral issue facing humans and sees solar photovoltaic as the primary solution to green house gas emissions in Florida. Because of his faith, he is creating a business model to help congregations go solar at a very competitive cost and offered to help LUMC if we would be his first test site. When all the options were considered and numbers crunched, the church's pastor, Rev. Robert Percy along with the trustees and finally a called church conference voted to replace the aging roof on the office building and install a 50 panel, 14.5 KW solar array. This initial step into supplying our own clean, renewable, sustainable electricity should provide over half of all the power use for the sanctuary, office building, and fellowship hall combined. Thoughts of making the entire campus completely net zero are still being considered for a future project.

For the actual installation, the church hired the roofing contractor, under Alan's direction to install the mounting hardware after the new shingles were in place, and a general contractor to file for the city permit. Then volunteers from Lakewood installed the rails, micro inverters, wiring harness, and panels. The final phase of the install required the general contractor's electricians to make the wiring run from the array to the breaker box in the office (which will supply all three buildings.) Next the city will perform the inspection for the final sign off of the permit. Finally, the application packet to interconnect the array to the electrical grid will be sent to the local utility. When all the paperwork meets the utility's expectations they will then replace the existing power meter with a bidirectional meter. Then, when the breaker is switched on the array will be producing electricity from the sun for decades to come.