



A new era dawns for Elgin congregation



This weekend has been filled with a host of environmental consciousness raising events in our area, such as the Elgin Green Expo. But it doesn't have to stop there. You can cap off the weekend by seeing a real-world example of "greenness" in full swing by heading out to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Elgin (UUCE), situated at 39W830 Highland Ave., three miles west of Randall Road.

As you approach it on Highland Avenue from the east, the newest addition is readily apparent: fully 40 photovoltaic panels are arrayed across the southeast side of the hip roof.

Surprising? Not really. The UUCE can trace its Elgin roots back to either 1846, or 1866, depending on which denominational track you use. A member of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA), it relocated to its present location in 1995 and brought with it all the pent up environmental energy and awareness it simply could not express at any of its prior sites.

And it has literally blossomed here. The grounds are well-appointed with garden spaces, native prairie plantings, and the massive Chartres-style Earth Wisdom Labyrinth. The annual

Prairie Fest is legend, and the social justice and environmental impact of its members across the community is equal to that.

That is a roundabout way of saying that this most recent step comes as no real surprise. It is more a matter of knowing that for them, the timing finally worked out.

The Rev. Dan Brosier, minister at the 150-member congregation, explained. "The roof panels provide a passive statement about the eco-consciousness of the church. Personally, that is what I am most excited about. People will drive by and know this sort of alternative really exists. It's not just some theory or science magazine article. This exists now. This church can do it, and maybe they will realize that they, too, can do it. At their homes, their businesses, their own churches."

The solar panels, installed by Solar Service, began generating power at the beginning of March of this year. Installation took about a week. Exposure for the panels could not be better. The roofline is high, unobstructed by trees, and generally southeast-facing.

Estimates figure that a little more than a third of the power for the facility will be generated by the panels, depending upon how sunny the weather is. The system only generates power when the sun is out. No storage battery system has been installed, primarily because of the added expense. And while currently the power generated cannot be sold back to the grid, the electrical meter for the building actually runs backwards when the system is fully engaged.

"You're essentially getting credit for the energy this provides," explained Brosier. "Supposedly, it is kilo-watt for kilo-watt; for every kilo-watt we generate, we get one back from our electrical provider."

The 40 photovoltaic panels mounted on the main hip-roof are projected to generate 11,727 kilo-watt hours per year, accounting for some 37 percent of the electrical needs of the congregation.

"This is all an outgrowth of the environmental awareness that has come through the formation of our Green Sanctuary Committee. Several years ago, a number of people started to look at the options we had for renewable energy here. We considered wind power, geothermal, and solar. But we didn't have the money to do anything at that time. Then, several

years ago, a couple who are members of our congregation and I started talking about this, and they decided to fund it.”

The Green Sanctuary Program was born out of the UUS's Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth and has as its goal that of making congregations sustainable and environmentally proactive. Beginning in 2002, it has accredited some 182 UUA congregations out of the 1,083 nationwide. There are 38 UUA congregations in Illinois, and 10 of those are now Green Sanctuaries. The UUCE holds the distinction of being the first to gain this impressive rating, doing so in the second year of accreditations in 2003.

Now the panels are in place and working. Maintenance is minimal, and the status and performance of each and every one of the forty panels can be accessed on-screen. Add to this the 25-year warranty on it, and you have a formula for instant gratification, low carbon footprint, and an economy of resources.

“By that time,” Brosier commented, “this technology will be old, and it will be time to put in something more efficient.”

“Most people look at this in terms of financial recoupment. But there is far more to this. It is reflected in how much CO₂ we did not have to produce, how many trees were saved, and how environmentally sound this is.”

Environmentally, this means that you can factor out a negative impact of 22,790 pounds of carbon dioxide, 46 pounds of nitrous gases, and 118 pounds of sulfate, all of which will simply not be put into the ecosystem. On the ground, this saves an estimated four acres of trees annually.

This all comes under the general heading of good stewardship of resources: of finances, of energy, of the environment.

“Theologically, we're Unitarians, so we don't have a specific theology, but you can turn to a lot of different theological sources. In the Christian tradition, there is the idea of the stewardship of God's Creation.”

There are plenty of other scriptural examples that may be drawn from the sacred teachings of the other traditions embraced by Unitarian Universalism. Virtually every religious tradition speaks to the sanctity of creation and humankind's responsibility to it.

So, with initial number crunching hinting at a return on investment within a decade, watching that dial spin backwards on a hot sunny day in August just might provide the sort of animated mandala that could manifest tranquility in the minds of everyone involved with the congregation. It's just the ticket for a sunny disposition. And this is probably only the beginning of UUCE's active involvement with alternative energies.