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Making Peace between a Planet and Its People

by Chrystal Bartlett

Google “care for creation” and you’ll find it’s a pan-religious movement. If nothing else, this demonstrates that all major religions—Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical and Baptist—all agree on at least one thing. Can I get an “amen” to that?

It’s good that this is the case. Reconciliation between a planet needing stewardship and inhabitants who often refuse to see that need will require everything from global to grassroots activity.

Many BPFNA partner congregations have taken “earth friendly” actions to create local justice through solar panels, energy audits, urban gardens, wildlife habitat, green construction and more. Each action helps the earth and local communities while it enriches congregations (sometimes literally), but each congregation shares the common goal of outreach and education.

Whether your congregation’s so overwhelmed it doesn’t know where to start, contemplating its first or its fifth earth-care mission, there’s food for thought and collective wisdom as we learn about other congregations’ path to peace with our planet. Or as Proverbs 1:5 puts it, “*Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance.*”

Community Gardens

The slow-food, farm-to-table movement has stimulated community gardens everywhere—including at houses of worship. Eating or donating fresh produce improves health—especially in urban “food deserts,” but it also provides green spaces that protect wildlife habitat and teaches children where their food comes from. And, as every parent knows, children readily eat vegetables they help plant, weed and harvest.

Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC, donates all of its expected 500 pounds of produce, except for some peppers, to Friendship Trays, a local charity preparing and delivering 700 daily hot meals to disabled, needy and elderly people in the area.

Sustainable in both financial and agricultural practice, the garden began with \$400 in member donations and successful donor solicitation to local business. Lowes gave 50 percent off for lumber, a company donated topsoil for the price of delivery, church members and farmers’ market vendors donated plants.

The church provides labor, but also had set aside \$1,000, which has not been needed. And, if Ed Williams, deacon and co-manager of the Friendship Garden, has his way, it never will be. Remember the peppers? He’ll be selling homemade pepper jelly and the profits are destined for the garden fund.

Williams advises, “You really need a half-dozen people who are really interested in making the garden work,” but also suggests using “two or three people, not a big committee, to decide what and when to plant.”

Deciding *where* to plant can be an issue for urban churches like **Metro Baptist**, located in the Hell’s Kitchen area of Manhattan. After a March 2010 community meeting where a garden was discussed, pastor Alan Sherouse (a BPFNA board member), recalled hearing a member



Left: Solar Panels at Burlington Baptist Church in Ontario.
Photo by George Wilbur.

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say, "I've always thought about whether we could grow vegetables on the roof."

With food production, community enrichment and environmental education as the goals, Metro and its sister nonprofit, Rauschenbusch Metro Ministries (RMM), collaborated with Clinton Housing Development Company and The Metropolitan Community Church of New York City (NYC). Volunteers—grant writers, architects, web developers, horticulturists and a retired city planner—pitched in. They got a \$30,000 United Way of NYC grant in January and, six months later, a 60-volunteer bucket brigade moved seven tons of earth up five steep flights of stairs.

All produce goes to the RMM Food Pantry at Metro. "You'd be surprised at how much our team can grow on the roof," Sherouse states. "Still, we know we can't feed an entire neighborhood with 1,000 square feet of soil. That's why we're equally proud of the awareness, education and community enrichment this project nurtures."

To that end, organizers are developing curriculum for after-school and teen-center participants to learn about sustainability and food justice, and even have some of their own planting beds. Rooftop gardens reduce urban heating and cooling costs in the structures that house them, while capturing stormwater and providing badly needed urban wildlife habitat.

Using Solar Energy

Better performance, cheaper equipment and rising grant opportunities make solar energy a hot emerging technology, but not every building, budget or location is suited. These churches found creative, low-cost ways to finance them, where they were suitable...

Last February, **Woodbine Heights Baptist Church** in Toronto, ON, installed 878 square feet of solar panels. Since July, they've generated 7,526 kilowatt hours to give them a power-company credit of eight cents per kilowatt hour, while keeping one ton of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from our skies each month.

Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC, got its 20-panel array using gifts from its Earth-keepers Group and renewable energy grants from the state's energy office. Generating 6,200 kilowatt hours yearly, the array meets one to two percent of the church's electrical needs on-site,

saving \$530 each year. Saving will rise during the system's 25-year life. So far, 3.5 tons of CO₂—about the weight of 200 cinder blocks—have been diverted.

Burlington Baptist Church in Burlington, ON, has a south-facing flat roof which works well with ballast-

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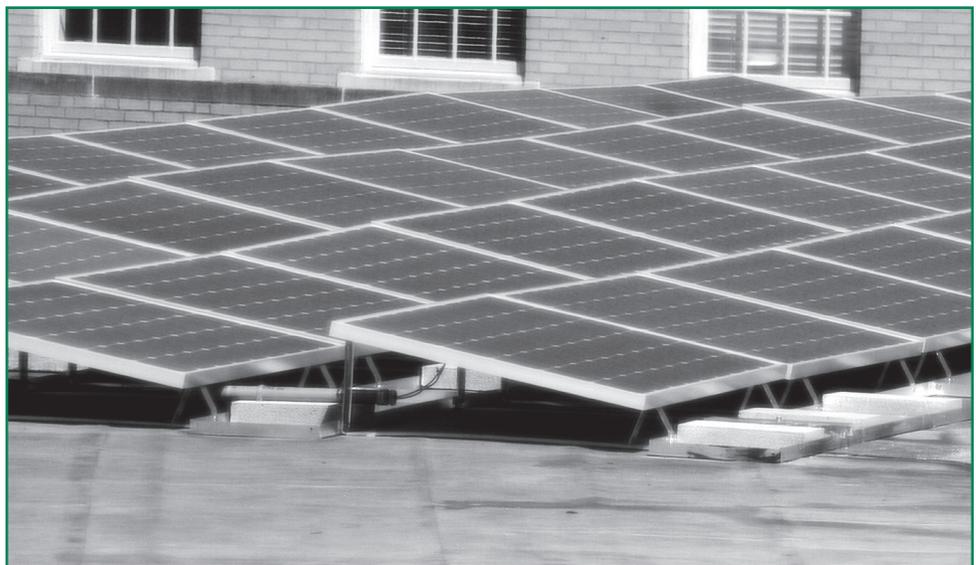
mounted systems and "with a payback in 7.5 years, it was a no-brainer," according to member George Wilbur. After signing a 20-year contract with Ontario Power Authority paying 80.2 cents per kilowatt hour, they invested \$75,000 for installation and since November 2011, have had "no issues whatsoever." They've prevented 10 tons of carbon from entering the atmosphere, while educating their congregation and the community.

Since May 2009, **Central Baptist Church's** 48-panel solar array in Wayne, PA, routinely generates 11,459 kilowatt hours, with only a few power surges and major snowstorms disrupting. The state's reverse-metering law yields 13.3 cents credit for each kilowatt hour generated and one "solar renewable energy credit" for every 1,000 kilowatt hours. Credit sales average \$250, despite market volatility.

Compact Fluorescent Light Bulbs

If solar energy is an emerging technology, compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) are now mature, mainly due to outreach, education, improved prices and quality. The

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Right: Solar Panels at Central Baptist Church in Wayne, PA.

Photo courtesy of Central Baptist Church.

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formerly shoddy, expensive and hard-to-find bulbs greeted them as warmly as early low-flush toilets.

Starting with a goal to educate and encourage others to use CFLs and \$1,000 in seed money, Central Baptist's energetic Ecology Mission Group bought 60- and 100-watt equivalent CFLs for less than \$2 from another congregation, then sold them to church members at \$2 per 60-watt and \$2.50 for 100-watt bulbs. The profits underwrote bulb donations to community centers and a Habitat for Humanity project with many Central Baptist volunteers.

First-year sales skyrocketed as households converted to CFLs, but dwindled rapidly as replacements were seldom needed and their new CFL-converts easily found affordable bulbs in retail outlets.

Today, Central Baptist is focusing on encouraging churches that want to go greener. Their green journey includes an energy audit, green cleaning products, paper reduction and a recycling program. This group has wisdom to share.

Green Construction

When the US devotes one-third of its total energy consumption to heating and cooling buildings, constructing more space seems counterintuitive. After holding Sunday school in hallways for 15 years, **Pullen Memorial Baptist Church** in Raleigh, NC, dedicated 9,800 square feet of "green-as-can-be" worship space in 2009.

Despite higher costs, the church paid for every green-building element it could afford—including recycled metal walls and roof shingles that never need painting, daylighting for optimal natural light use (and motion-sensing lights in halls, bathroom and stairways) to reduce light usage.

A 7,500-square-foot green roof captures and cools stormwater runoff while cooling the space below. The

church also invested in a geothermal heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) system that saves \$6,000 yearly compared to conventional systems. It also prevents 125 tons of CO₂ emissions—the same weight as the Statue of Liberty's steel frame—from entering the atmosphere.

Energy Audits

Many BPFNA congregations that want to go greener have gotten energy audits. Audits are like a journey: you start with recommendations, prioritize projects, fund-

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In Charlotte, NC, **Park Road Baptist Church's** first audit occurred in 2007, but, after replacing windows in the children's building, budget priorities prevented further action until 2012. The old records were lost, but North Carolina Interfaith Power and Light (NCIPL) supplied another audit in 2012, putting them back on track.

Michael Kellett, minister with youth and children, is at the volunteer-recruitment stage. Kellett says tasks range from "covering windows to cut down on solar heating, turning off computers at night and putting a timer on steeple lights so they cut off in the middle of the night."

It's too early to record impacts, but gathering baseline data for future comparisons to track progress will motivate volunteers and can be useful at budget time.

In 2009, NCIPL gave Pullen Memorial a free audit in exchange for hosting a local church workshop on energy reduction. Both Pullen's original building, which dates back to 1923, and its green-as-can-be addition were audited. The results were surprising.

As expected, energy leaks from badly sealed doors, windows and exterior walls were rife in the old building, which needed CFLs along with better maintenance for its aging boiler. However, the new building also had problems! An icemaker ran 24 hours



Left: The rooftop garden at Metro Baptist Church in New York City will provide produce for food pantries and provide teaching opportunities. Photo courtesy of Metro Baptist Church.

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a day, despite being needed only a few times a week; appliances remained plugged in, and drawing current, when not in use; a room vent too close to an air return confused the thermostat; and even light-emitting diode (LED) safety lights use less power on a timer!

Obviously, buildings of any age can benefit from an audit. While Pullen hopes for more funds for bigger ticket items, its focus on no-to low-cost projects yields this lesson shared by Phil Letsinger, part of a volunteer group that donates time and talent to maintain the church. "CFLs work great," he says, "but those activated by motion-sensors burn out quickly."

When **Myers Park Baptist** in Charlotte, NC, began its green journey 15 years ago, environmental work was viewed as "fringe," but the church considers it a vital part of its mission.

After securing a reduced-cost energy audit (\$800) through the state's energy office several years ago, Bob Thomason, EarthKeepers member and energy-effort spokesperson, said the findings were so compelling immediate action was taken. Weather stripping the doors cost little, but saved enough to repay the engineer in one year.

Upgrading their HVAC computer control system would save \$25,000 annually, so the church installed it during the study. Variable speed drives for HVAC efficiency, motion sensors for stair and hall and bathroom lights cost more and took longer, but made significant environmental and financial impacts.

The audit and solar array, extensive recycling and a new community garden will help Myers Park attain a Leadership in Energy Efficient Design designation for Existing Buildings. But Thomason says, "One of our goals is to get more people in our church and the community involved. This is just as important—and maybe more important—than reducing our own footprint."

Wildlife Habitat

Wedgewood Baptist Church, also in Charlotte, is the first Baptist church certified by North Carolina Wildlife Federation's "Faith Actions Impacting the Habitat" garden program. The non-denominational designation recognizes places of worship that

Right: Workers install solar panels at Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC.

Photo by John Bambach, used courtesy of Myers Park Baptist Church.

meet crucial requirements for a wildlife-friendly habitat.

Wedgewood not only provides shelter, water, food and native plants for wildlife (watered by rain barrels) while maintaining a butterfly garden, compost patch and recycling program—they're building a trail, too. More importantly, Wedgewood uses the site to teach and set an example for others—whether at home, work or, as pastor Chris Ayers describes it, "Anywhere they are on the good planet Earth." In 2008, Wedgewood received a "green award" from *Charlotte Business Journal* and the Charlotte Chapter of the US Green Building Council.

Looking Back

The environmental movement may not have begun in the church, but we're rapidly gaining ground in environmental justice mission work. Without justice, our land, air, water and people—all of God's creation—suffer. When we serve our planet and its people, we send a message of love far beyond pulpits and congregations; we embrace the entire planet. In love, we peacefully reconcile a planet and its people. May God bless our actions to inspire others to do the same.

—*Chrystal Bartlett is a communications and marketing specialist in Raleigh, NC, with a profound interest in environmental issues. She is a member of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, a BPFNA Partner Congregation.*

Editor's note: Just before press time, Esther Sleep of Burlington Baptist notified us that a local organization, Burlington Green, honored the church in its "group" category. The award was presented by the prominent primatologist Jane Goodall.

