

Solar power good fit with theology

By Kelly Egan, The Ottawa Citizen April 30, 2011



St. George's Church manager Georges Bouliane stands before the church, which opened in 1923. This spring, solar panels are to be erected on the large south-facing roof behind him as part of a \$245,000 project. Kelly Egan, The Ottawa Citizen

Across the city, churches have seen the light. It is, indeed, heavenward. It's the sun.

As many as a dozen churches, of many denominations, are investigating the installation of solar-power plants, mostly on their roofs, as a way to exercise their faith while feeding a thinning treasury.

St. George's parish on Piccadilly Avenue is poised to be the first Roman Catholic church in the archdiocese to go solar in a big way.

Built in 1923, the church was laid out on an east-west axis, leaving it with a large, steep, south-facing roof, ideal for an array of solar panels.

Parish manager Georges Bouliane said the seed was planted more than a year ago with a call from John Dorner, a lifelong educator who also promotes environmental stewardship for the archdiocese of Ottawa. Check out this workshop, he urged. They did.

The timing was fortunate. St. George's was about to embark on a \$2.5-million expansion and renovation of its aging building. Solar was a great fit.

"We have the perfect roof for it," said Bouliane, a retired principal.

After scouting about, the church settled on a plan to use 169 panels in a power-plant that is to generate 35 kilowatts of electricity. It will cost about \$245,000.

The plan takes advantage of an Ontario Power Authority program that pays small producers a big premium for solar production, in their case 71.3 cents a kilowatt hour, guaranteed for 20 years.

At that rate, it should generate about \$35,000 annually, enough to repay the initial investment in seven years. After that, the funds will support ongoing programs and financial needs at the church, which serves about 800 families.

Advocates for solar programs in churches point to two main advantages: Not only is there a much-needed, guaranteed revenue stream, but the use of solar also fits into many faiths' commitment to social and environmental responsibility.

"This is a good fit with our theology," said Rev. Mark Whittall, the pastor of the Parish of Huntley, an Anglican church, one of three he serves in the area.

"We operate with an understanding that we have a responsibility to care for the earth."

To that end, the Parish is looking at installing a nine-kilowatt plant on the roof of its parish hall in the village of Carp. It would cost \$70,000, but pay back about \$8,000 a year through the so-called feed-in tariff program. That has been hugely popular across Ontario, so far attracting almost 30,000 applications.

Kathryn Guindon is the Ottawa representative of a program called Greening Sacred Spaces. She has spoken to many churches, of many different faiths, about adopting more sound environmental practices.

"I've had interest expressed in solar from pretty much every faith group," she said, including Hindus and Sikhs. "It's definitely a hot topic for a lot of churches."

She would not be surprised if eight or 10 churches are running solar projects within a year or two.

Not every church is a suitable candidate, advocates warn. Some don't have roofs that are shaped or positioned correctly; others have concerns about the visual intrusion, while others worry about the potential financial risk.

All agree, however, that the use of solar in a church setting has a third important value: messaging, in a positive way, to the broader community.

“I’d like to get the message out to other churches to have a look and, if it helps, to contact me,” Bouliane said.

St. George’s has undergone significant change during the past 10 or so years. The adjacent elementary school relocated, then the building was torn down to make way for luxury homes. A set of tennis courts on the south side was also given over to housing.

The current plan is to add 2,600 square feet in meeting space and to upgrade all of the interior systems — electrical, plumbing, heating — add an interior staircase, modernize the washrooms, elevator and kitchen, and replace many windows.

Bouliane hopes the solar project can begin this spring. All of the work, including the expansion, should be done by the end of the year. The church is currently fundraising and has corralled about \$700,000 toward its goal.

Solar power, thanks to generous government incentives, is enjoying a renaissance at the moment, perhaps best underlined by a coalition movement called the 1,000 Solar Rooftop Challenge.

This week, the Ottawa Renewable Energy Co-operative had a launch, looking for members to join a co-op that can pool private investors to take on a medium-sized generation project, be it solar, wind, hydro or biogas; and Saturday, a solar power fair was held at Ottawa City Hall, followed by tours of solar installations.

We are, indeed, walking towards the light.

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