

St. Alban's Episcopal Parish Practices Stewardship of Creation by Installing Solar Panels

"There is a moral dimension to the energy choices we make, and, as conscientious individuals, we cannot ignore the impact our energy use has on the planet. Countless members of faith communities all over the world have begun to recognize their religious duty to care for God's creation. We recognize that human civilization is polluting our environment, which is not ours but God's creation. So we are choosing to be faithful stewards of this most precious of God's gifts.

We see our skies befouled with pollution from power plants and factories, only to learn of the greater damage that invisible carbon dioxide causes by trapping the sun's heat. We read warnings about the toxic levels of mercury in our waters from burning coal. We see precious valleys and countryside destroyed by mountaintop removal mining and catastrophic coal-ash spills. We must accept that the fossil fuel energy sources that have improved our way of life for generations have also had some horrific consequences.

At my church, St. Alban's Parish of Washington, we decided to explore energy options that would reduce our carbon footprint while still meeting our energy needs. We were put into contact with Jigar Shah, former head of the revolutionary D.C. solar-energy company SunEdison. With help from Shah, Mayor Adrian Fenty's office and other organizations, St. Alban's Parish installed a wonderful 14.06-kilowatt photovoltaic system on the roof of our Satterlee Hall — turning the building into a clean-energy-generating station.

Our system now generates enough energy to displace nearly 23 tons of CO₂ emissions a year, significantly offsetting our carbon footprint. Yes, we still draw energy from the grid, which is mostly made from burning coal. But we're putting more clean, renewable energy back in than we take out. We're making a contribution.

And we're saving money. In essence, what we've done is "lease" our roof to an investor who teamed with a solar provider to install the system. Because they own the array, they will undertake any necessary care and maintenance. The energy produced will be sold to the utility and put on the grid, where it will help to power homes and businesses throughout the District. In exchange for allowing the use of our roof, we have locked in our utility costs for 20 years at today's rates. To say the least, that's a pretty significant budget item for us. We know that energy prices will rise over the next 20 years — but not at St. Alban's.



To our knowledge, St. Alban's is the first church in the District to install solar panels. We certainly don't want to be the last. Congress seems to be a long way from taking comprehensive action to address this problem, but in the past churches have not waited for laws to tell us to help the needy, fight for social justice or make our communities better places to live. The harm that will be visited on our planet during the next generations in the absence of action today makes this a greater imperative than any other social issue.

Besides, the panels look pretty neat. We refer to them as our newest stained-glass windows. You may know that the original purpose of stained-glass windows was to tell visually the story of God's redeeming love. Our panels tell a similar story. They tell of God's love for us by giving us this beautiful Earth and our responsibility to care for it wisely."

- Account from Rector, the Rev. Scott Benhase that appeared in the Post.