

# Methodist churches unite to buy green energy

180 North Texas UMCs will boost windmill-driven power

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By SAM HODGES / The Dallas Morning News

[samhodes@dallasnews.com](mailto:samhodes@dallasnews.com)

In an apparently unprecedented move for a large religious group, United Methodist churches of North Texas have joined forces to buy "green" electricity generated by windmills in the western part of the state.

The contract negotiated by the North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church takes effect on New Year's Day and covers 180 churches.

Environmentalists say they're unaware of another conference, diocese, synod or any other body of churches that has used its economic clout to spur nonpolluting electricity production.

"We've got to give credit to the [North Texas] Methodists. They go to the head of the class," said the Rev. Sally Bingham, founder and president of The Regeneration Project in San Francisco, which works to engage religious people and groups in ecology.



The churches' contract with Hudson Energy Services requires a 10 percent purchase of electricity from renewable sources within Texas.

This doesn't mean that when somebody flicks a switch at First United Methodist Church of Dallas, 10 percent of the electricity will come from a wind turbine. But it does mean that Hudson is obligated to buy renewable energy equal to 10 percent of what the 180 churches use.

Ten percent translates to 4.2 million kilowatts a year, or about 280 average-sized homes with electricity generated solely from green sources such as west Texas wind, said Dan Marzuola, Hudson's vice president of sales and marketing.

The Methodists' big group purchase will increase the share of Texas' electric grid that comes from wind power and decrease the share from air-polluting coal-fired plants, said Bee Moorhead, executive director of the Austin-based environmental group Texas Interfaith Power and Light.

She described the United Methodists' contract as potentially "market changing" because it serves as a model to other religious groups and shows the clout any large customer has in demanding green electricity.

Since 2001, most churches in the 20-county North Texas Conference have taken advantage of deregulation by coming together to negotiate for a favorable rate that holds for the length of the contract.

Conference officials began to negotiate a new contract earlier this year. Because the conference had taken a pro-environment stand in 2006, voting to join a stewardship campaign organized by Texas Interfaith Power and Light, officials asked that companies bidding for the new contract include some green power.

Hudson prevailed with a four-year contract, at a rate conference officials would not disclose.

Churches will see about a 15 percent increase in electric bills under the new contract, according to a letter they got from the conference. But that's because market prices have increased since the last contract was signed, said Trenton Cogdill, a consultant with Priority Power Management who helped with negotiations.

Tom Christian, assistant director of property and risk management for the North Texas Conference, agreed that the green power component was not a major price factor.

"We were surprised at the small amount of additional cost that it took to go 10 percent green," he said. "We're excited and pleased and looking to increase [the percentage] even more over the next contract."

Mr. Marzuola said that by buying electricity as an "aggregation group" (the industry term), the churches save between 6 percent and 8 percent over what they would pay individually. The green component costs about 6 percent, leaving what he described as "an effective neutral to 2 percent cost reduction" by buying as a group.

The new contract lets individual churches pay Hudson extra for a higher percentage of green power, and some plan to do so.

Northaven United Methodist Church in North Dallas has many environmentalists among its 580 members and will pay an extra \$2,400 a year to go 100 percent green, said Eric Folkerth, pastor.

He called the decision "a no-brainer, given the values of our congregation."

Most denominations aren't as centralized as the United Methodists, and some areas don't have electricity deregulation.

But the North Texas United Methodists still provide an example, Ms. Moorhead said.

"If they hadn't asked for it," she said of the wind-generated electricity guaranteed by the contract, "it wouldn't be produced."