

## Go green: Steps to a greener church community

Rich Heffern | Dec. 1, 2010 Eco Catholic

It's a grass-roots kind of movement around the country: Catholic parishes, one by one, have expressed interest in going green and have taken steps to accomplish it. Usually it's one or two parish members who initiate the effort. The parish responds.

Here are nine steps any parish can take to begin the process of becoming a sustainable church community. These steps can help reduce energy bills, tackle climate change, and build a more green future.

**1. Improve water-use efficiency** This includes measures like more water-efficient landscaping of parish grounds, water-use reduction, landscaping with plants that don't require a lot of water, and using low-flush toilets in parish facilities. Reusing rainwater for irrigating property can be done with rain barrels, specially



designed containers that catch rainwater runoff from roofs. Also, small steps like detecting

and fixing leaky faucets, installing high-efficiency toilets, and watering lawns with the minimum amount of water needed can greatly improve efficiency. Fixing a silent toilet leak may save as much as 500 gallons per day. Installing high-efficiency plumbing fixtures and appliances can help reduce indoor water use by one-third, saving on water and sewer bills, and cutting energy use by as much as 6 percent.

Since watering the landscape with an automatic irrigation system may likely be the single largest use of water on parish grounds, dramatically improved water efficiency can be accomplished by using proper irrigation and scheduling techniques such as cycling the sprinklers. Using these techniques will also cut the impact on rivers, lakes and streams by reducing non-point-source pollution.

### **2. Improve energy use efficiency**

This includes using technology that optimizes energy performance, on-site renewable energy measures, and reducing energy use. For example, adjusting the thermostats 1 degree lower in the church, parish hall or other



facilities can cut heating costs 5 percent over the course of a heating season.

Setting the air-conditioning a few degrees higher has an equal effect. Using more efficient lighting, such as compact fluorescent light bulbs in fixtures that see a lot of use, can help cut electricity use. The U.S. Department of Energy has an online energy audit tool that can help you get started at [hes.lbl.gov](http://hes.lbl.gov).

Purchase carbon offsets to make your parish "carbon neutral." A growing number of sources offer electricity from renewable energy products such as solar arrays or wind farms that generate electricity without carbon emissions or pollution. See [www.green-e.org](http://www.green-e.org) [3] for a list of renewable energy providers whose generation projects have been certified for their environmental benefit.

**3. Reduce, reuse, recycle** Reduce waste by use of recycled products, products that do not have packaging or that use recyclable packages, and/or by recycling material that can be recycled, including electronics.

Parishes use a lot of paper. Try using at least 30 percent post-consumer recycled content paper and print on both sides of every sheet. Making paper from recycled materials instead of virgin timber produces a third less water pollution, three-fourths less air pollution and almost half less energy.

Place recycling bins in accessible places.

There are many products on the market that claim to be green. Beware of "greenwashing." Many products are advertised as green but after review do not live up to their claims. Here are six factors to consider when selecting green or sustainable products and materials for projects and everyday use in the parish:

*Renewability:* Are the products made from material that is rapidly renewable such as cork or bamboo? Wood products are also a renewable resource. Consider wood products that are FSC (Forest Stewardship Council)-certified.

*Recycled content:* Using material with recycled content not only reduces strain on landfills but reduces the need for raw material. Paper, cardboard, plastic, steel and aluminum are a few of the most commonly recycled materials.

*Reusability and recyclability:* Many products, such as metals, can be recycled after their usable life. Others can be salvaged and used somewhere else.

*Durability:* Choose products that will stand the test of time and require little maintenance. This will save time, money and energy on repairs at a later date.

*Embodied energy.* This is the energy used to produce, transport and install a product or material in the place where it will be used. Choose local products when possible and products that do not require a large amount of energy to produce.

*Waste reduction.* Choose material that does not create a lot of waste and can be used efficiently. Order materials in sizes and lengths that are efficient for your job.

4. **Consider indoor environmental quality** This includes acoustical performance, increased ventilation, low-emitting materials and thermal comfort. (For more information, visit [www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/indoorenv](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/indoorenv) [4].) Also look into green cleaning products. They are as effective as conventional products without many of the chemicals that are harmful to health and the environment. See [greenseal.org](http://greenseal.org) for a list of environmentally-friendly products.
5. **Educate by example** The operation and structure of parish grounds can provide opportunities for experiential learning and discovery for parishioners and others. Consider permaculture principles and applications for parish grounds (see [www.midwestpermaculture.com](http://www.midwestpermaculture.com)), or organizing and sustaining a small organic garden on parish grounds. Use the produce for the parish food pantry or parish dinners.
6. **Form a creation care group** A committee of clergy, staff, parishioners, parents and youth can regularly advise parish leaders on sustainability, and monitor environmental, human health, stewardship and related issues affecting the parish and affected by the parish.
7. **Help parishioners make the connection** Share the good news about the bounty and blessedness of creation through homilies, Bible study and religious education programs. Talk about the universe around us as revelation of divine creativity, about our human responsibility to care for the Earth, and the benefits of a strong relationship with nature. Proclaim the many-faceted benefits of simpler living.
8. **Buy local, seasonal foods** Compost food waste, use only tap water and minimize the use of disposables in food preparation and service. Consider making your parish's food-related events vegetarian, which greatly reduces the environmental impact of meat production and provides a good witness against the cruelty with which factory farm animals are often treated. Purchasing locally-grown organic produce is a good way to reduce the carbon footprint of your parish dinners, luncheons and snacks. It also supports practices that are better for the Earth, for worker health and for the local economy.
9. **Reduce transportation-related emissions** Replace vehicles with fuel-efficient, hybrid, or alternate fuel vehicles; encourage clergy, staff and parishioners to use mass transit, carpooling, telecommuting and/or choosing local suppliers and contractors who are energy efficient.

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