

Free tool helps congregations save money, reduce emissions

Charles Morris | May. 22, 2012 Eco Catholic

In my [previous blog](#) [1], I shared an interview I recently had with Jerry Lawson, the national manager of the EPA's ENERGY STAR for Congregations program, and with Steve Bell, a consultant who works with the EPA's [Portfolio Manager energy performance tool](#) [2]. In part II of our conversation, we address the issue of this powerful, free tool available to congregations that enables them to save money and energy and reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

I have taken advantage of this easy-to-use tool both at my previous assignment at St. Elizabeth in Wyandotte, Mich., and at my current assignment at St. Christopher in Detroit. We discovered at St. Elizabeth that just putting a programmable thermostat in the church and proper maintenance of the boiler system reduced our energy use by 11 percent in less than a year and offset 29,000 pounds of greenhouse gas emissions.

What is the Portfolio Manager energy performance tool? How does it work?

Portfolio Manager is an online software operated by the Environmental Protection Agency that parishes can use to track their energy savings and their emission reductions over time. It is based on the data from the DOE [Department of Energy] national Commercial Energy Consumption Survey plus an independent data collection. Portfolio Manager has become the national standard tool by which energy use is tracked and is now used by over 340,000 buildings. This simple tool allows a layperson to understand energy use in your building. Taking weather, equipment, square footage, energy use, hours of operation and utility rates into account, it "scores" a worship facility on a 100-point scale. A score of 50 is average and a 75 indicates you are in the upper 25 percent of energy-efficiency for a building of your type. A 75 score is eligible for the ENERGY STAR label and tends to equate to 25 to 30 percent savings and 30 percent greenhouse gas emissions over a typical building. There are 17,692 buildings that have earned the ENERGY STAR label -- that comes to 3 trillion square feet. Anything you do to save energy is an important thing for the environment as well as the financial position of your parish.

Why is it such a blessing for congregations to participate?

Portfolio Manager is an accurate, objective, taxpayer-supported tool. If you don't succeed in preventing pollution and saving money, then we haven't done our job at ENERGY STAR. Also, part of our job is recognizing success.

What exactly does Portfolio Manager track? Energy savings, emissions offsets types, etc.?

Portfolio Manager tracks energy use [BTUs/square foot] by fuel type. It will acknowledge if you have green tags [purchasing carbon offsets] or if you have installed an on-site solar system. It will track utility use if it goes up or down. As online software, it has the capability to interact with national weather data by your ZIP code and "normalize" for weather anomalies. If you don't have weather normalization, you can get false calculations on the return-on-investment for efficient equipment. For example, you may have a colder or warmer winter or summer than normal. Portfolio Manager takes those weather variations into account to give you an accurate impact of the energy you are saving. It also identifies what utility you are using by ZIP code, and it uses the

EPA's [eGRID database system](#) [3] to take into account the amount of pollution your utility is generating. This is morally crucial. In fact, both The Catholic Coalition on Climate Change and Interfaith Power & Light speak up in behalf of mercury standards and advocate the regulation of carbon as a moral issue.

How can houses of worship get a baseline of their energy use when houses of worship vary in size and usage and vary by climate both in terms of regions and in the changes in the climate year to year?

Portfolio Manager is designed to take all of this into account. The power of the national tool is getting stronger and better. A new, even more user-friendly version of Portfolio Manager will be launched in the future. It's really very simple. You input your monthly utility bills. Portfolio Manager is able to normalize for size of your facility and for the weather. The neat thing is that you can benchmark your progress in energy savings and emissions offsets both in comparison with other similar houses of worship as well as against your own baseline. Portfolio Manager allows you to do both and supports aggregations of an individual building's data within a parish, a diocese or even nationally.

Explain the good news potential in telling the story of energy reduction.

The path toward energy efficiency is fruitful in multiple ways:

- You are saving money.
- You are preventing pollution. Wasting less energy results in less pollution in the waterways, in the soil and in the air.
- You help protect human health, which is significant. (EPA's charge, when it was established by Congress, was to protect human health.) Asthma is epidemic. Environmental justice is a moral fairness issue.
- Green jobs are created and economic development happens.
- You give a good witness in saving natural resources for future generations. By definition, those resources are non-renewable.
- You are getting what you pay for, and only paying for the energy you truly need. You can make a one-time or long-lasting expenditure for efficiency, or you can continue to pay the utility for more than you need. In the business community, congregations might find there is an opportunity for free audits and savings that can pay for the efficient equipment. Savings pay their own way.
- The asset value of the building increases.

How can groupings of parishes such as a State Interfaith Power & Light or a diocese benefit by the ability to aggregate everyone's energy savings and emissions offsets?

I think we all find strength in numbers and learn from one another. While the action happens in the individual parish, aggregating helps us to understand and to measure the good. Other people can translate into health impacts. We can use the data to achieve further good -- i.e. health issues. This, in turn, helps the program to continue to exist. It shows the power of the faith community to act together.

Are there any plans to track the savings at the household level for individual members of a congregation to track their changes in the aggregate? [For example, if 30 households in a congregation decide they want to track their own changes, can we measure the effectiveness of a parish's witness as it trickles down to the parishioners and their lifestyle changes?]

It hasn't happened yet. The ENERGY STAR [home improvement program](#) [4] has the [Home Energy Yardstick](#) [5], which scores home energy use on a 1 to 10 scale. An interesting example is [Opower](#) [6], a company that works with utilities. They can track energy savings at the household level and communicate those savings back to the residential utility customer within a congregation. Currently, Opower is working with some pilot congregations to track some of their parishioners' energy savings, and aggregate and report those savings back

to the entire faith community. Opower communicates back to individual use and compares it to neighbors. This is a great way that parishes can help their parishioners save money and do something worthwhile for the environment. This pilot project relies on the power of social networking to increase energy-efficiency at the household level. People can easily, with a little education, save at least 2 to 2.5 percent in their energy. As folks save money on their energy bills, they provide an anchor in their neighborhood and are able to in turn to better support their church

How much does it cost a parish to participate in ENERGY STAR?

Nothing -- you have already paid as taxpayers.

NOTE: As reported in my previous blog, ENERGY STAR is sponsoring a Battle of the Buildings that will recognize houses of worship that save 20 percent or more on their bills in 2012. The deadline to sign up this year is Wednesday. [Get more information](#)[7].

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Links:

- [1] <http://ncronline.org/node/30318>
- [2] http://www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?c=evaluate_performance.bus_portfoliomanager
- [3] <http://epa.gov/cleanenergy/energy-resources/egrid/index.html>
- [4] http://www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?c=home_improvement.hm_improvement_index
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