

EPA energy-savings competition open to churches

Brian Roewe | Mar. 18, 2014 Eco Catholic

An annual national energy-savings competition asks parishes, churches and worship spaces to weigh their energy temperance against their community neighbors.

The Environmental Protection Agency's [Battle of the Buildings](#) [1] enters its fifth year in 2014, and will allow for teams of five or more buildings, as well as individual buildings to compete in both energy and water conservation. To enter, buildings must submit energy data for 2013 into EPA's Energy Star portfolio manager. The application period runs from April 16 through May 16.

From there, participants will provide additional energy usage updates throughout the year.

There's no cap on how many buildings can join a team, meaning an entire school district could sign up together, or all parishes in a deanery or diocese, or a university campus.

Awards are given to the top teams and buildings that reduces its energy or water use by the highest percentage. In addition, EPA will recognize top buildings in various categories, and teams and buildings that reduce energy by at least 20 percent. The 2013 winner will be announced April 16; previous winners include a New Jersey elementary school, and a dormitory at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

To assist parishes and other houses of worship in their energy-saving efforts, EPA through its Energy Star program recently [created a workbook](#) [2] specifically addressing the needs and realities faced by faith communities.

The workbook relied on data and insights from a number of faith groups, including the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (which includes the U.S. bishops' conference), Interfaith Power and Light, GreenFaith and the Catholic Climate Covenant (formerly the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change).

"The most significant action individual congregations working at the local level can take is simply to reduce energy waste and practice sustainability. Energy efficiency is one of the quickest, most cost effective ways for congregations to cut carbon pollution," Gina McCarthy, EPA administrator, said in a statement in the workbook.

McCarthy said that EPA has learned that many congregations can cut energy use, costs, and emissions by 30 percent often with low- or no-cost steps.

The workbook outlines seven steps to energy management:

1. Make a commitment
2. Assess performance
3. Set goals
4. Create an action plan
5. Implement the action plan

6. Evaluate progress
7. Recognize achievements

Beginning the process first requires buy-in from the congregation. The workbook recommends faith leaders or a stewardship team emphasize the positive qualities of cutting energy use that resonate with traditional tenants of one's faith: reducing threats to health and human life and eco systems from energy-related pollution; responsibly maintaining a parish's or church's resources and facilities by maximizing and extending their lifespans; conserving natural resources for future generations; and serving as a model of "practicing what we preach" for the community, from individual homes to nearby businesses.

Taking on such a project can also engage the faith community in a collaborative manner by having people, young and old, contribute their skills and talents.

While Energy Star encourages congregations to pursue its certification by earning a score of at least 75 on its 1-100 energy efficiency calculator, it notes that savings can still be seen without achieving that benchmark. Often, communities beginning with a below-average score see the greatest savings -- in 2008, buildings with an initial score of 50 saved double that of buildings starting with an above-50 score.

To determine a baseline score, Energy Star recommends gathering information about a church's buildings, from its annual energy usage, to maintenance history, and when, how and how often energy-guzzling appliances are used. For large houses of worship (seating for 250-plus people), Energy Star found lighting represented the greatest expense component, equating nearly 30 percent of total energy use. In contrast, heating made up the bulk of the energy pie for small (under 100 seating) and medium-sized (100-250 seating) worship facilities, at nearly 60 percent and 65 percent, respectively; large spaces saw both heating and cooling usage just below 20 percent of total energy usage.

The workbook also includes a range of helpful tips on how to cut usage, from keeping lights off on nights and weekends, installing programmable thermostats and regularly verifying their accuracy, and using power strips for appliances and computers. It also recommends checking with groups like Interfaith Power and Light or GreenFaith to see if they offer free or low-cost energy audits for faith communities.

The results of such steps can be eye-opening. In Houston, the nondenominational Lakewood Church -- at 16,000 seats, the largest regularly used U.S. worship facility -- saw annual utility bills of \$1.5 million. After a year in the Energy Star program, it saw savings exceed \$360,000.

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