

Asheville church puts faith in solar power

As good stewards of the Earth, church has 42 roof panels installed

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Sundance Power Systems employees Grayson Newell and Curtis Davidson install solar panels on the roof at First Congregational United Church for Christ on Oak Street Tuesday afternoon. The church will have 42 solar panels installed. 3/8/11 - Erin Brethauer (ebrethau@citizen-times.com) / Erin Brethauer/Erin Brethauer

Written by
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ASHEVILLE — First Congregational United Church of Christ's gray stone gothic façade evokes history and tradition.

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But the view looking out the stained-glass windows of the 85-year-old church is far from old-fashioned.

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Workers from Sundance Power Systems spent Tuesday installing 42 black solar panels on the roof of the building adjacent to the church.

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First Congregational is the first congregation in Western North Carolina and one of only a handful in the state to put in solar panels to generate electricity.

• First Congregational United Church of Christ is holding a "Solarbration" noon-2 p.m. April 3 at 20 Oak

The church, with the help of nonprofit

St.

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Appalachian Institute for Renewable Energy, is also piloting a new way to help congregations, nonprofits, schools and governments take advantage of state and federal renewable energy tax credits.

Good stewards

The Rev. Joe Hoffman wanted to install the solar system since the 300-member congregation moved to the church on Oak Street in 2005.

"I think as people of faith we are called to care for this place we live," he said. "We've been called to take care of it, and we haven't been doing a great job of it.

"I hope we can be an example to other faith communities on how to break our dependence on oil and coal."

The project got off the ground following a workshop by the Appalachian Institute for Renewable Energy, or AIRE, and N.C. Interfaith Power and Light last summer.

The church can't apply for state and federal tax credits, so AIRE helped the church set up a limited liability corporation.

First Church Solar LLC, which includes six private investors, enables the \$50,000 solar installation to be eligible for a 65 percent tax credit.

Rather than generate electricity for the church, the 10-kilowatt system is connected to the electrical grid. Progress Energy and N.C. Green Power pay the company for the energy it generates.

The system generates enough electricity to power two homes in WNC for a year.

The investors are expected to earn back their money in five years.

They plan to donate the solar panels to the church, which will then get the money generated by the solar panels, about \$2,000 annually.

"It supplies energy to their (Progress Energy's) grid, but it also means they don't have to build another coal-fired power plant," said Rio Tazewell, education and outreach coordinator for AIRE.

Social outreach

The church wants to help get similar solar projects installed at other churches or community centers.

AIRE also hopes to work with other organizations to create corporations like First Church Solar.

The solar installation follows along with other church outreach programs, like feeding the hungry and housing the homeless, said Richard Fireman, who works with AIRE and N.C. Interfaith Power and Light.

"Congregations can often be the leaders for social programs in this country," he said. "I look at this as social outreach."