

## One parish's attempt to go green

May 4, 2015

Fr. Peter Daly

Our parish has been trying to go green for the last eight or nine years. Earth Day seemed like a good time to reflect on just how well we are doing. If I had to give us a grade, it would be a B-. We've made some progress, but there is still a lot more to do.

We have not gone as far in this effort as the Vatican, which has put solar panels on the roof of the papal audience hall and purchased forest land in Hungary. The Holy See is the first country in the world with a neutral carbon footprint.

Pope Francis is about to issue a document on stewardship of creation. He is following in the path of Pope Benedict XVI, who was probably the most environmentally conscious pope yet. We need to catch up to Rome on this issue.

So what have we done?

Back in 2007, we established a GoGreen Committee. It looked at the whole parish, including our activities, our major public buildings, and the use of our land (nearly 100 acres at the time). The committee came back with a thorough report. The full report is still on our website.

Here are some of their recommendations and what we have done so far.

### **Perform a full environmental audit on the parish center and our whole campus**

We have actually done this twice in the last seven years. It has been moderately productive. Over the last 12 years, we have switched all of our buildings' heat from oil to natural gas. It is much cheaper and much cleaner. We have done this as construction or maintenance required. In our parish center, where our offices and religious education rooms are, we replaced the old wasteful HVAC system, put in much better insulation, and replaced the oil-fired boiler with a natural gas boiler. Our heating costs went from \$11,000 per year to \$1,000 per year.

On our other buildings, we are working on conservation.

This year, we have begun a process of replacing our florescent bulbs in the Family Life Center with light-emitting diodes. This has three major benefits:

- They save a lot of power. In our gym, for instance, we currently have 336 florescent bulbs using 40 watts each, plus a ballast in each fixture that uses 40 watts. When we replace with LEDs, we will eliminate the ballasts and have two 15-watt bulbs that actually put out more light, going from 120 watts per fixture to 30 watts, a 75 percent reduction.
- LEDs are safer. They have no mercury vapor like florescent bulbs.
- They only have to be changed every 10 years instead of every six months to a year. Since the gym fixtures are 40 feet above the floor and it costs \$75 per hour for a crew, we will save a lot of money and maybe a life or injury to our crew.

We are also replacing our parking lot lights. The electric company will give us a \$150 rebate for each fixture. It costs \$190 per fixture. So the electric utility will basically pick up the cost for this. We have 48 light poles. We will go from 400 watts per pole to 100 watts.

### **Upgrade recycling across the parish campus**

We've done this. We have recycling bins in all our buildings. However, people still don't comply. I find lots of aluminum, glass, plastic and cardboard in the trash.

But gradually, people are getting the message. We have a recycle run twice each week to the local dump with a full pickup truck. (Parishes generate a lot of recycling.) We have a little collection hut for aluminum, which generates money for our local Habitat for Humanity chapter. We recycle most paper.

### **Institute "green liturgies" on a semiannual basis**

We have completely failed at this. It is my fault. We need to think about this issue at least twice per year, probably in April around Earth Day (April 20) and the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, patron saint of ecology (Oct. 4). We should pray for a better awareness of stewardship of Earth, too.

### **Convey conservation land to our local land trust and initiate forestry conservation**

Our parish is blessed with a lot of land, most of it in old-growth forest. In the last five years, we have sold 16 acres to our local land trust (for only \$37,000). This land will now be kept in its natural state in perpetuity. We have also formulated a forestry conservation plan on the rest of our property. The forestry conservation plan has the added benefit of saving property tax, since churches in Maryland pay tax on unused land. When we put the land in conservation, we radically reduce our tax bill. However, it reduces our freedom to develop the land for five years at a time.

We have worked with the local land trust to establish a trail over our property and other parcels of land that goes more than 6 miles from our church to the Chesapeake Bay. People now come to our parking lot to begin the hike. The first half-mile or so is on our land. This has been the most exciting project. Our Scouts have gotten involved, building bridges over streams and benches for people to rest.

### **Create a "Go Green" bulletin board**

We are a total failure at this. We just didn't do it. Somebody has to maintain it. Today, it is probably better if we use our website. Nobody looks at bulletin boards anymore.

### **Initiate planting of native species**

We are doing better. We no longer plant many evergreens. Hardwood is more native to our area. We have reclaimed the grass on the hillside adjacent to the rectory, which means less mowing. It also saves stormwater run-off.

One fun project we have done to control weeds and unwanted growth in our stormwater management ponds is bringing in goats, which we borrow from a local farmer. This saves us a lot of labor in not having to weed-whack more than an acre of steep ground. The preschool kids love to go look through the fence at the goats, too.

### **Eliminate Styrofoam from parish activities**

We have done well here. At first, there was a lot of resistance. People complained about Father Daly and his crazy ideas. But now that we have switched to all paper cups and plates for more than five years, nobody complains. I always tell them that if Starbucks can do it, so can we.

### **Develop and distribute "green" shopping bags**

We did this over three years. We need to do it again. The parish sold more than 2,000 cloth grocery bags. People use them at the local supermarkets instead of getting plastic. It not only saves on terrible plastic bags, which kill the fish and the birds and pollute the area waters, but it is a good evangelization tool. We put our parish logo on the bags, which advertise our church every time we shop.

### **Education**

Apart from our website, we have not done anything here. The committee died out several years back. Nobody did anything about incorporating environmental stewardship into our religious education programs or confirmation preparation. We talk a little about it in RCIA. But basically, we have failed on environmental education.

We have sponsored some hikes and walks, which encourages an awareness of nature. We have focused on some saints who tell us to respect nature. St. Kateri Tekakwitha and St. Francis are both in our windows. They give us a chance to talk about the earth.

So I guess we are batting about .500 on the environment. If this was baseball, we would be in Cooperstown. There is a lot more we can do.

Resistance comes from three quarters.

The archdiocese resists the new or unusual. I announced my desire to take our parish 100 percent solar. They came back with fears and cautions -- there was no "bravo." We are pushing ahead anyway. I can get a grant from the state to put in carports in our parking lots with solar panels. The carports will shade the parking lot, and the solar panels on the roofs of the carports will produce electricity. The state will pay because these will be charging stations for electric vehicles.

Parishioners and visitors sometimes resist. We have cut way back on our use of fertilizer and pesticides, especially on the athletic fields and lawns. The runoff into the bay and groundwater is a terrible pollution, but people like to see a green lawn fit for the Master's Championship. When we cut back on watering in our cemetery and on our lawns, we got some resistance. But we are saving a lot of water, which is costly. We found that automatic sprinklers can be adjusted to save water.

All in all, we are probably no better than a B-. But we are getting better. We started with some big steps and many little ones. I've discovered that the important thing is to begin.