

Sunday, September 30, 2012

Solar savings enable churches to flex their faith

ECONOMIC DRIVER



At Faith Community Church in Hopkinton, Rev. Mike L. Laurence stands near the roof-mounted solar system that has saved the church \$2,500 in the two months it has been running. (T&G Staff/RICK CINCLAIR)

By **Priyanka Dayal McCluskey** TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
pdayal@telegram.com

“ I think churches want to be visible symbols for doing the right thing for creation. ”

-- VINCE MARAVENTANO, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MASS. INTERFAITH POWER & LIGHT INC.

Mendon's Bethany Community Church might be known locally for its good work, but Rev. Phil McCutchen got a call from someone last year who was interested in a different aspect of the church: its big roof.

An out-of-state solar energy company thought the big, southern-facing roof would be a great place to install solar panels.

"They found us through Google Earth," the pastor said. "I was surprised, but I was really excited because I've always believed in solar power."

The church ended up signing a deal with a local company, Solect of Hopkinton. Arrays of more than 700 blue-gray panels now cover the building's vast roof. The system is big enough to supply all of the church's energy needs and is expected to cut its energy bill in half.

"This is a way we can control our cost of electricity and do something good for the environment," Rev. McCutchen said.

The cost of solar power systems can be prohibitive for churches. As nonprofit institutions that don't pay taxes, they're not eligible for tax credits that reduce the cost of solar systems.

Bethany Community Church — one of just a few churches statewide that have solar panels — was able to afford the system through a power purchase agreement. Through the agreement, the church had no upfront costs. A group of investors affiliated with Solect purchased the solar system, and the investor group charges Bethany monthly for the power provided by the system. The church has the option to buy the system at a later date.

"When you can reduce the cost of ownership to purchase a solar system, the entry point for customers opens up," said Stephen J. Bianchi, a partner at Solect.

Most of Solect's customers are businesses, Mr. Bianchi said, but he'd like to do more church projects. The challenge is finding investors to take a chance on a nonprofit.

At Faith Community Church in Hopkinton, a roof-mounted solar system installed by Solect has saved the church \$2,500 in the two months it has been running. Rev. Mike L. Laurence, the pastor, said he hopes the collection of more than 600 solar panels will save the church \$12,000 to \$15,000 a year.

With an annual budget of about \$2 million, the church is not cash-strapped, according to Rev. Laurence. But every dollar counts. What Faith Community saves on energy costs, it can spend helping children, the homeless or adults with addiction problems.

"It provides flex," he said. "Having funds available just means you're able to do more good with it."

Churches are a fairly new market for the solar energy industry in Massachusetts, but Vince

Maraventano, executive director of Massachusetts Interfaith Power & Light Inc., said solar panels are a natural fit for houses of faith.

The interfaith group, which promotes energy efficiency and sustainability, launched a program this summer to encourage churches to go solar. Eleven churches have signed on to lease solar panels from SunBug Solar of Somerville. Leasing is another option that allows the customer to pay monthly and avoid upfront costs.

"The interest has really increased dramatically," Mr. Maraventano said, "and the reasons are that they've become more cost-effective and, frankly, we were able to arrange for a leasing program with SunBug that was too good to pass up."

The potential cost savings of going solar are appealing, but also, he said, "I think churches want to be visible symbols for doing the right thing for creation."

So far, there have been few complaints about the aesthetics of modern technology on the roofs of religious buildings.

"If they are visible, that's great advertisement for our philosophy," Rev. McCutchen said. "We know people have a good feeling toward anyone who's protecting the environment."