

Small Talk

strengthening the small
Unitarian Universalist
congregation

March 2011

Just give me the warm

power of the sun / Give me
the steady flow of a waterfall
. . . Just give me the restless
power of the wind / Give
me the comforting glow of a
wood fire.

—from the song “Power,”
by Peter, Paul, and Mary



Inside...

About Small Talk....pg 2

Wind Power.....pg 3

Issue Index.....pg 4

Wind Power on the Prairie



With a mere 50 members in worship, the Nora UU Church in Hanska, Minnesota, built a wind turbine on their property this past year, producing their own power and reflecting their values of social justice and caring for the environment.

by Mark Wiger and the Rev. Jane Dwinell

Nora Unitarian Universalist Church, in Hanska, Minnesota, is known as a small but bright liberal beacon on the windswept prairies of rural southwestern Minnesota. This story is about how a congregation of less than 75 members (with 50 on average in worship) is doing its part to reduce carbon emissions by producing “green” electricity via a wind turbine on church property.

continued on page 2

About Small Talk

Small Talk is published monthly by The Rev. Jane Dwinell, small church consultant. *Small Talk* is devoted to strengthening the small Unitarian Universalist congregation through informative articles, resources, and good ideas.

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continued from page 1

The project began with the small but ambitious social justice committee, seven to nine folks who also have an interest in the environment. Escalating energy costs are connected to social justice because of the disproportionate negative financial impact they have on the poor.

A couple of years ago, the congregation chose energy as an area of focus for the church year. In addition to exploring ways members could each personally reduce their consumption, they also looked at broader policy issues and various practical methods of producing green energy. An energy auditor, found through the local electricity utility provider, also assessed the church facilities (at a cost of \$75), and some members took the state-sponsored Energy Challenge—check it out at www.mnenergychallenge.org.

At the conclusion of the 2009 church year, at the annual meeting, the congregation voted to hire a consultant to evaluate the feasibility of investing in geothermal, solar, or wind as an alternative energy source for the congregation. The consultant was funded through the social justice budget for \$750. The congregation was educated prior to this vote via several newsletter articles, talks by various speakers, and sermons by past ministers and their current consulting minister, Lisa Doege.

The report determined that wind electrical generation had the best payback and would be the most practical—the church grounds are situated on one of the highest points in Brown County.

The process moved forward through more education and three congregational meetings (with votes) in February, May, and June 2010. The first vote authorized the committee to look into building a wind turbine at the church, to contact an accountant and an attorney, and to start the process of acquiring a building permit from the county. The second vote authorized the formation of a for-profit corporation, later called Prairie Beacon, and authorized the committee to seek a line of credit at a local bank with which to construct the turbine. The third vote authorized the purchase of a Jacobs 21-30 generator on a 120-foot tower, pending the award of a \$20,000 USDA grant.

The most unique facet was the necessity of forming a for-profit corporation in order to qualify for the two sources of available funding: the USDA grant and a 30 percent federal stimulus rebate. Prairie Beacon, the for-profit corporation, consists of a four-member board—all members of the congregation—and the congregation as the lone shareholder.

“How is this legal?” you ask. The for-profit corporation is generating and selling electricity, which is “unrelated business taxable income.”

A “blocker corporation” is put into place to provide a separation between the income and the tax-exempt entity (the church). The blocker corporation incurs and pays tax on the operating income that is allocated to it and thus blocks such income from reaching the tax-exempt entity. Every state has different laws—check with your own state if you’re interested in doing this.

In the case of Nora, zoning variances were required, an easement was needed, an energy reverse metering contract was negotiated with the power company, the USDA grant application was written by a professional grant writer (for \$2,000), and contractor bids were reviewed.

The committee and the various professionals worked successfully on all these items.

In the end, this \$100,000 project will cost the congregation \$50,000 to \$60,000. The church did not do an official capital campaign, but various members chipped in money along the way. It is estimated that, with the local electric utility purchasing the wind-produced power from Prairie Beacon, the project will be paid for within twenty years.

In November 2010, members gathered to break ground, consecrating and celebrating the beginning of this new chapter in the life of the Nora church. The foundation was poured and power lines were dug into the ground before winter set in. Tower construction began on March 7, 2011. The tower is now up and running, graceful in the Hanska skyline.

The various votes taken by the congregation received about 75 percent approval. Discussions pro and con were thoughtful and respectful. The primary concerns expressed were about the amount of money. This has been one of the congregation’s bigger decisions, and the committee is proud of the members’ willingness to take on this project.

In hindsight, the key to the the project’s success has been church members’ involvement and respectful,

ongoing communication. After fifteen newsletter articles and eighteen speakers and meetings to discuss all aspects of the project, the dream became a reality. Although the project is projected to provide a reasonable rate of return on investment, many in the congregation supported the project anyway because they felt it was the right thing to do. It fits with the congregation’s values of protecting the world and environment by producing green energy for themselves and their neighbors. They hope to continue to be a beacon on the prairie.

The key to the project’s success has been church members’ involvement and respectful, ongoing communication.

Thanks to Darrell Hinsman, Angie Becker, and Lisa Doege for help with this article.

To see more photographs of the new tower, and to find out more, visit the Nora website at norauuchurch.org.

For more specific information, contact Darrell Hinsman (dhinsman@newulmtel.net) or Mark Wiger (mbwig@comcast.net).

Editor’s note: I have recently learned of several small congregations in the U.S. and Canada that have installed—or are considering installing—solar panels on their roofs and are selling power to their local utilities. This is another option for your congregation if your location is not appropriate for wind power. Check it out!

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The Issue Index

GENERAL ADVICE

What is a Small Congregation?	December 2003
The Small Church of the Future	October 2004
Knowing and Telling Our Stories	May 2005
Transformational Congregations	January 2006
Wrapping Up the Church Year	June 2007
Centering, Connecting, and Creating Change	October 2007
The Seven Habits of Highly Ineffective Churches	March 2008
Peter Morales for UUA President	March 2009
Who You Gonna Call? (trauma response)	October 2010
Give Thanks for Your Small Congregation	November 2010

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Governance Structure	January 2004
Greatest Challenges #2: Burnout	October 2006
How to Get the Work Done	December 2007
How to Run a Meeting	February 2009
Advice for Leaders	March 2010
Advice for Followers	April 2010
Supporting Youth Leadership	September 2010

MONEY

The Annual Canvass	March 2005
Greatest Challenges #4: Money	December 2006
Capital Campaigns	April 2007
The Financial Crisis and Your Congregation	January 2010

BUILDINGS

Buildings: Pros and Cons	March 2007
How to Help Your Building Pay for Itself	April 2008

STAFF

Committee on Ministry	February 2006
So You're Looking for a Minister	June 2006
Greatest Challenges #3: Ministry	November 2006
Sharing Staff in the Small Congregation	January 2009
The Care and Feeding of Your Part-Time Minister	April 2009

COMMUNICATION

Publications: Part One (layout)	November 2004
Publications: Part Two (content)	December 2004
Technology: Help or Hindrance?	November 2005
Facebook for the Small Congregation	February 2011

CONFLICT AND CHANGE

Conflict	January 2005
Greatest Challenges #5: Conflict	January 2007

NITTY-GRITTY

Numbers (statistics to keep)	February 2004
-------------------------------------	---------------

WORSHIP

Creative Worship	February 2005
Summer Worship—Yes or No?	June 2005
Building a Music Program	October 2005
Celebrating December Holidays	December 2005
Going to Two Worship Services	May 2007
Multicultural Worship in the Small Congregation	June 2010

RELIGIOUS EXPLORATION FOR CHILDREN

Religious Education for Children	May 2006
Integrating Children	September 2007

RELIGIOUS EXPLORATION FOR ADULTS

Small Group Ministry	April 2005
-----------------------------	------------

CARING FOR EACH OTHER

Pastoral Care (double issue)	December 2010–January 2011
-------------------------------------	----------------------------

HOSPITALITY

What Should We Do With Our Visitors?	January 2008
---	--------------

BEYOND OUR WALLS (wisdom from other congregations)

Small is Beautiful Report	September 2004
Small Congregations Speak Out	September 2005
The Small Congregation in Transylvania	February 2007
New Orleans: New Life for Small Congregations	May 2008
Small Congregations at General Assembly	June 2008
The Living Room Church, Part One	September 2008
The Living Room Church, Part Two	October 2008
The Living Room Church, Part Three	November 2008
The World of the British Unitarians	May 2009
Some Good Ideas from the British Unitarians	June 2009
A Little Goes a Long Way (social justice)	May 2010

MISSION

Social Action	March 2004
Welcoming Congregation Work	March 2006
Greening the Small Congregation	April 2006
Another Look at Social Action	November 2007
Anti-Racism Work in the Small Congregation	December 2008
Climate Change and the Small Congregation	February 2010
Wind Power on the Prairie	March 2011

GROWTH

Growth: Part One	April 2004
Growth: Part Two	May 2004
A Roadmap to Change	June 2004
Greatest Challenges #1: Growth	September 2006
The Meaning of Membership	February 2008

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