Going Solar - Creation Justice Action in our Congregations
By Christian McIvor

In April of 2018 at the Annual Gathering in Dayton, Ohio, for which the theme was “Earth: Beloved Community,” the Alliance of Baptists formally adopted our Statement on Environmental Justice. The statement calls us, as individuals and as a community of faith, to 1) preach, teach, and live a theology of Beloved Community; 2) respond pastorally to the fear and grief of climate catastrophe; 3) engage in personal and corporate spiritual disciplines in the consumption of resources; and 4) advocate for public policy that supports a compassionate and responsible attitude toward all matters of creation justice. The 2018 Alliance gathering inspired the birth of the Creation Justice Team at College Park Baptist Church in Greensboro, NC, a ministry team dedicated to upholding the principles of the Alliance Statement on Environmental Justice in our congregation and local community.

Over the past year, College Park’s Creation Justice Team has worked on several initiatives to raise awareness around issues of creation justice in our congregation.

• We have an ongoing “Creation Project” art installation on the walls of our church halls, which features photos and artwork from our members that speaks to them of the beauty of God’s creation.
• College Park youth-created signage for our kitchen and fellowship hall noting which items should go in our compost and recycling bins after meals.
• Our bulletins are now being offered online through the church website to reduce paper waste.
• An “Outdoor Club” was started as a means of fellowshipping together outside on our city’s beautiful greenways.
• Creation justice is a recurring theme in College Park sermons, liturgy, original congregational songs and other musical selections, and Wednesday night educational programming.
• One of our members compiled a detailed report on the energy and lighting efficiency practices that we already have in place at College Park.
• Another of our members who works for the city’s Field Operations department ensures that properly updated signage is posted around the church near our multiple recycling bins and also supplies green living facts and suggestions that we draw from on a weekly basis for “Creation Care Considerations” in our bulletins.
• Drain marker and Adopt-A-Stream programs are planned for the coming year, pending the city’s review of our applications.

Perhaps the most significant step our church has collectively taken is to commit to installing solar panels for sustainable energy production. This decision came about as a result of conversations that initially took place in our Creation Justice Team meetings. College Park member and engineer Kevin Shortt took the lead on investigating solar plans, costs, and expected benefits for the church and the local community. He says, “We initially dug into researching solar mainly out of a desire to be better stewards of the environment. But as we ran the numbers, it became a ‘no-brainer’ because it should not only pay for itself but become profitable over the life of the system.”
Ultimately, we decided to work with 8MSolar to install a 28.52-kilowatt system on our education building, which will offset 93% of our current kilowatt-hour (kWh) usage (kWh usage accounts for about 50% of our monthly energy bill). This means that once the system is installed, we will only be drawing 7% of our current kWh usage from the utility company and the rest will be provided by the solar system. While non-profit entities cannot receive federal tax incentives, there is a rebate program currently being offered by our local utility company which will bring the total cost for installation to around $32,000; a rebate check in the amount of just over $20,000 will be issued by the utility company 6 months after the system is commissioned. By installing the solar system, College Park is essentially locking in kWh rates for the future, and based on production per year it is calculated that the system will have paid for itself within 10 years, after which electricity generation will be free. Warranties for each part of the system will surpass that 10-year mark and include a 25-year warranty on the panels themselves.

On average, we should produce ~39,552 KWh/year for the next 25 years, for a total of 988,880 KWh. Based on this projection, over 25 years the church will save almost $74,000 in energy costs. The Environmental Protection Agency’s Greenhouse Gas Equivalencies Calculator can quickly show a potential solar system’s impact in various ways. As compared to fossil fuel sources, the amount of KWh produced by College Park’s system over 25 years will reduce C02 emissions equivalent to 122 homes’ electricity use for one year or 78,681 gallons of gasoline consumed, it will avoid greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to 245 tons of waste being recycled instead of landfilled, and it will reduce the amount of carbon typically sequestered by 823 acres of US forest over the course of a year. We hope to have the installation completed by December.

In an age where climate reports continually urge us to act now, before it’s too late, College Park has committed to making creation care a top priority. Pastor Michael Usey offers the following:

"The earth is the Lord’s," the psalmist says (Ps 24). Not ours, the Lord’s. And God has placed us here to help care for it. Our constant use of fossil fuels is ruining creation, so we at CPBC have considered solar energy as one way to reduce our carbon footprint. It’s a small thing we can do to be better stewards. Steward in the NT is oikonomos, a household economist in the Great Economy, a local economist in the world as the household of God. We can be more faithful to this calling than we’ve been. As a church, we believe installing solar panels is another small step in that direction.

We at College Park do not in any way claim to be leaders in the creation justice movement, but we do claim to have recognized that caring for the entirety of creation is one of the most important and impactful ways that we can deeply love God and all of our neighbors. We hope that by sharing our story, we might inspire other congregations to consider going solar and formulating creation care best practices that are appropriate and relevant for their contexts. If Christian faith communities can come together and work together in the love of Christ toward a greener, cleaner, and more sustainable future, then there is hope that we will be able to shake off the climate despair that many of us currently find ourselves experiencing. With love, hope, and unity of purpose, we can hold to the faith that God will lead us into a new creation, “making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland” (Is 43:18-19). The time for action is now, and all are invited to join the creation justice movement!

For those inspired to organize and take action in their own congregations and communities, a short list of helpful websites and resources can be found here (scroll to bottom).

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MM and DMA degrees from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and he will complete his MDiv at the Wake Forest University School of Divinity in May 2020.