

Virginia church wins award for energy conservation

by [Elizabeth McGowan](#) in the [May 18, 2022](#) issue



Young congregants at Rock Spring UCC celebrate completion of a 119-panel solar array atop the church's Carpenter Hall. (Facebook)

When the choir at Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ complained about overheating while harmonizing under incandescent lights more than 15 years ago, congregant John Overholt didn't just empathize. He acted.

The self-described "handyman who fixes things" replaced the 20-plus blazing hot bulbs in the chancel ceiling with cooler, then state-of-the-art, money-saving compact fluorescents.

That stopgap switch not only granted the toasty singers relief but was also an early indicator of the Northern Virginia church's environmental ethic. Since then, that commitment has only accelerated.

Rock Spring UCC is this year's winner in the energy saver category of Interfaith Power and Light's Cool Congregations Challenge. The Oakland-based organization's mission is to motivate people of faith to take bold and just action on climate change.

The national contest, initiated in 2011, this year drew 77 entries in six categories that also included cool planner, sacred grounds, renewable role model, electric vehicle leader, and community inspiration.

“We want to celebrate congregations that are leading by example,” Sarah Paulos, community engagement director for the interfaith group, said about the contest’s message. “You can’t just sit back and hope things will get better.

“Hope is an action—it’s a verb, not a noun. If you want to see a difference in the future, you have to start doing things differently today.”

Overholt is a force behind Rock Spring’s collaborative and overarching goal of becoming a net-zero church campus, the first in Virginia, by reaching peak energy efficiency in all 33,000 square feet of its sanctuary and two other buildings. Ideally, it strives to eventually meet its energy needs on-site and even redirect some power back to the grid.

The church is spending \$405,000 in the first part of a two-phase initiative. The first part, completed in October, included blowing in improved attic insulation, as well as replacing a roof and covering it with a solar array.

On tap for this year is automating the lighting, heating, and cooling systems, weatherproofing sanctuary windows without compromising their historic character, and upgrading other windows.

The arithmetic shows the investment has the potential to drop the church’s annual utility bills by 85 percent, from about \$37,000 to \$5,000.

Overholt, a steady member of Rock Spring’s property board, began attending the church 41 years ago because its spirit extended beyond the neighborhood.

“This church spends its money for community good and the good of the world,” he said. “For me, that has major appeal.”

Aiming for net zero on its campus was such a high target that those spearheading the initiative presented three in-depth talks to congregants, fielded questions, and explained financing, said Laura Martin, a Rock Spring associate pastor since 2015.

Much of their to-do list came from a spring 2019 basement-to-roof evaluation by the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers. The

ensuing study opened organizers' eyes to dollars wasted on energy escaping through air leaks.

Church members gave the pursuit of net zero a resounding thumbs-up—97 percent voted yes in October 2020. Ultimately, the church opted to finance \$284,000 of phase one costs via a 20-year loan from its endowment fund.

Actually attaining net-zero status will likely require future outlays for battery storage and other technologies, Overholt said. Still, he's impressed the church is an aspiring pioneer.

His advice to other congregations curious about venturing into eco-friendly alterations? "Start small. It can be as simple as changing all exit sign lights to LEDs."

Martin is hopeful that recognition from Power and Light will be a beacon for others.

"What's exciting is letting us tell the story of what we did," she said. "That inspires congregations to see what's achievable."

In fact, she's already heard from leaders at First Plymouth Congregational Church near Denver, which seeks to follow Rock Spring's green lead.

Does the Arlington church have plans for its \$1,500 in prize money from Power and Light?

"Oh yes," Martin said. "We will certainly put it toward net-zero work."

—Energy News Network. This story is part of the SoJo Exchange from the Solutions Journalism Network, a nonprofit organization dedicated to rigorous reporting about responses to social problems.