

Energy Efficiency for the Climate and the Poor



Helping the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized is a central tenet in the Christian gospel. The command to care for “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40) has fueled a novel, new energy program that cares for the least of these while caring for Creation.

Brad Rouse, a self-proclaimed “climate warrior,” joined the [Good Shepherd Episcopal Church](#) in the small town of Hayesville, North Carolina in 2007. He had become concerned about climate change while living in Atlanta and was drawn to the church’s [Green Team](#) and the mission that “we be good stewards of what we have been given and love our neighbors as ourselves.” He wanted to use his passion for environmental action and his years working in the utility industry to make a positive change.

Rouse started a program through his church to provide free energy upgrades to families in need. Working with the [Society of St. Vincent de Paul](#), church volunteers go out to the trailers and homes of disadvantaged families, perform an energy assessment, identify sources of free or low-cost materials, then fix the problem. Upgrades include such things as LED lighting, weather-stripping, insulation, and replacing inefficient heating and cooling systems.

“Some poor families are extremely energy inefficient,” said Rouse. “Low-cost housing will meet their housing needs, but it costs a lot to care for a house and they end up paying a lot for electricity. This is what we’re trying to help.”

Some of the fixes are simple: repair holes, switch out lights, and seal openings in windows. Others require some detective work. Rouse remembers helping a disabled man who was paying an energy bill for his 600 square-foot apartment that was three-times more what Rouse was paying for his 3500 square-foot home. The church’s team insulated his water heater, switched out light bulbs, told him to wash his clothes on cold, and bought new filters for the vent. When that didn’t fix the problem, they just took a look at what he was doing. It turns out the man was simply turning the heat button to the least efficient setting.

It’s examples like this that show how helpful the church’s work is for the community. Utility companies and green organizations can publish informational pamphlets to help the poor [reduce their energy usage](#), but the fix isn’t always simple. Sometimes it takes more than a light bulb to help a family afford its electricity bill. “You have to be there and see what they’re doing and talk with them about it,” explained Rouse.

This church’s hands-on and open approach has resulted in lower energy bills and reduced carbon emissions for families in Hayesville. When they won Interfaith Power & Light’s [Cool Congregations Challenge award](#) on Earth Day, they had helped more than 40 families reduce their carbon footprint by 33 metric tons/year. That’s a CO2 reduction of 10-20% per household and the equivalent of preventing 35,000 pounds of coal from being burned.

But Rouse recognizes that limiting this work to Hayesville won’t make a big difference. He wants to expand the program to make more of the “poorest of the poor, rich in energy

efficiency.” To do that, Rouse is getting the word out and looking for funding options. His hope is that more faith-based organizations will see the opportunity to do something that will address the climate and poverty and together they can create some momentum for real change.

Because even if you don’t agree with the [EPA’s proposed carbon pollution regulations](#) or accept [climate science](#), it’s hard not to see the value in energy upgrades. The Good Shepherd Episcopal Church team has found a way to help the poor afford the electricity that lights their homes and keeps them warm. They are simply fulfilling their Christian duty to care for the least of these, and that’s something that should appeal to all Christians whether they’re conservative or liberal.

I am so touched by the support you are giving us. Our main guy, Brad Rouse , feels like every little thing we do is making the world better. He could (and I hope does) tell you how this will be multiplied ---preventing pollution and climate change while helping low income families manage their bills. My joy is getting to know the families, hearing their stories and trying to build relationship. I even tell the folks at check out (when I buy \$200 in bulbs!) why we do this and I can see how amazed they are—they just did not think about it!

Much love to you and gratitude for the work you do. Wish you could be here to eat from our garden!

Peace and all good,

Amy

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