

# **A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift**

by  
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## **A Real Plus Side of Amazon**

It seems like Amazon is always in the news either because of its size, the products it provides for everyone, complaints by some of its employees, or because of its lack of paying more taxes. People are either for it or against it. Here is one reason why I am for, not so much the company, but the founder, Jeff Bezos. Earlier this year in February 2020, he announced pledging \$10 billion to address climate change. My understanding is that the office will open sometime in July and will start issuing grants for specific projects. But the real question is how will these funds be utilized?

The funds from the Bezos Earth Fund will be distributed to scientists, activists, NGOs and anyone else wanting to make a difference on climate change. A specific example of how to have an impact on mitigating climate change is through a religious non-profit. The Christian church I attend is one of 58 in six Midwest states. While there is a relation between its theology and ecology, very little is being done to have the parishioners join in helping improve the environment. So I formed a committee of five people from five different parishes, and we are planning to apply for a grant. Again, the key is what are we planning to do?

How one starts on a program like this is no different than introducing sustainability into a company. You have to start at the top and be sure that the company board and its CEO are in agreement with embedding sustainability. So here, we will make presentations at clergy meetings to be sure the priests at each of the 58 parishes understand the science of climate change, the impact that it has had on the planet earth, and what further impacts it will have if it is not mitigated. Initially these informational and educational presentations will be done online with live lectures that will be recorded for later viewing. Similar presentations will be prepared for the church members and their children.

In the following years after the pandemic has subsided and people can once again gather, the education will take place at conferences, primarily in the Chicago area but livestreamed to churches throughout the Midwest. We will be planning to invite some of the top climate change experts such as James Hansen and Bill McKibben given that the Bezos Earth Fund will provide sufficiently to cover expenses. These kind of speakers provide more credibility which is something that is needed to convert the deniers.

Education, however, is not enough. What is also important is the need to initiate activities that will help mitigate the problem. Using my church as an example, we are planning to add solar panels on the flat roof of the community center. With the many incentives that are available, it is a no-brainer to make this happen. There is a federal tax incentive of 26%, which was just reduced from 30% in 2019 and will go to 22% in 2021, and the availability of an accelerated depreciation that allows taking the 21% tax benefit all in the first year. The local energy provider is also offering a tax rebate and the State of Illinois will soon provide funding

through its Solar Renewable Energy Credits program. With all these benefits, the payback can be less than five years. But you might ask how can a non-profit like a house of worship benefit from the tax incentives. We are planning to ask some of the church members that have their own businesses for which they pay income tax. We will form an LLC or LLP consisting of two to four church members, and they will pay for the solar energy system. After their investment is paid off through the incentives and the energy savings, they will donate the solar energy system to the church and really feel good about it. The church will have a system to receive free electrical energy for the next 25-30 years at no cost. We plan on providing this example as an incentive for other churches to do something similar.

For various reasons, some houses of worship may not be suitable for solar energy. There are other ways that they could implement a system that will do something similar. Converting all the lighting fixtures to LEDs, having the lighting turn off automatically, or using smart meters are just a few examples of what else can be done.

The main point is that there are many opportunities to make a difference in addressing the climate change problem, and the Bezos Earth Fund is there to help you. Go for it. We are.