

Faith Bus Tour

Witnessing Habitat & Energy Best Practices
in Raleigh NC Faith Communities



David Grace
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Toyota TogetherGreen by Audubon

Photo Credits: Velu Ochoa and Dave Grace

Abstract

This is a reflection on an April 25, 2015 tour, organized by the Youth Faith Conservation Network (YFCN), of best practices in habitat and energy in Raleigh NC faith communities. The tour convened 12 relevant stakeholders to the overlap between Audubon's Bird Friendly Communities program and faith communities, including nonprofits¹, faith communities² and students.³ Key outcomes were awareness raising and agenda setting in a way which was participatory and encouraged two-way information sharing between stakeholders characterized as planners and local actors. Awareness raising involved not only the portrayal of current best practice in habitat and energy in Raleigh faith communities but also illumination of the dynamics of their implementation. Agenda setting involved convening an existing, newly-partnered network, that of Audubon NC and North Carolina Interfaith Power and Light (NCIPL), as well as in generating new collaboration within this network: identification of two sites for native plant habitat demonstration sites (bird gardens).⁴ The tour's success in awareness raising and agenda setting suggests the benefits of pairing stakeholders and resources in the form of the best practices themselves as well as the knowledge and connections embodied by the stakeholders.

Background

¹ Nonprofits represented - Audubon, NCIPL, YFCN, and Greenway Transit (a hybrid for/nonprofit)

² Faith Communities represented- Trinity Avenue Presbyterian, Church of the Nativity Episcopal, Western Boulevard Presbyterian, and Community United Church of Christ

³ Students from Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment

⁴ Sites identified for Bird Gardens – Trinity Avenue Presbyterian and Church of the Nativity Episcopal (See Figure 4)

The YFCN is an Audubon Toyota TogetherGreen project in partnership with North Carolina Interfaith Power and Light (NCIPL). The YFCN supports high school conservation leaders within faith communities in Raleigh and Durham, North Carolina. The YFCN is currently supporting four high school youth in designing and implementing conservation projects within their two respective Raleigh faith communities.

NCIPL is a focal point for community organizing, including projects of the Audubon NC program, Bird Friendly Communities. NCIPL has recently partnered with Audubon NC to expand their focus on habitat on faith community grounds, seeking climate-friendly options such as shelter and food for wildlife principally through a Brown-headed Nuthatch Nesting Box campaign and native plant habitat designs. As these projects are initiating new collaborations to address new issues in habitat, a tour of best practices was considered important by the YFCN to be able to witness current best practices within faith communities in order to share these practices among faith communities.

The YFCN is poised at the intersection of Audubon and NCIPL to conduct habitat and energy initiatives within Raleigh and Durham faith communities by supporting high school conservation leaders within faith communities.

Description of the Tour

In short, the tour provided some answers to the question what are best practices in habitat and energy in faith communities and provided a “vehicle” (literally) to convene relevant stakeholders to witness these examples and share with one another. The tour’s specific mission was to “drive” toward generating habitat and energy improvements within particular faith community settings.

The bus tour included three Raleigh churches and 12 participants. Though this number was less than we expected, significant stakeholders were represented from Audubon NC and the national Audubon Society, North Carolina Interfaith Power and Light, Raleigh and Durham faith communities, as well as current and former students from Duke University’s Nicholas School of the Environment. The mode of transit was a biodiesel van run by Greenway Transit. Best practices in energy included financing for solar panels (by LLC and donation) and energy efficient lighting for faith communities, including discussion of steeple lighting and bird impact. Best practices in habitat included planting native plants, community gardens, installing bird tape, and Brown-headed Nuthatch Nesting Boxes. Less clearly defined best practices witnessed included the use of columbariums and the facilitation of youth leadership.

Stop # 1 | Highland United Methodist Church (HUMC)

HUMC is in a residential, urban setting bordered by large, upscale homes. Tom Lamb is the facilities manager and the point person for coordinating HUMC’s sustainability initiatives. Tom has worked in this position for fifteen years; he is involved with the church’s green team; additionally, he is enthusiastic for these initiatives (Tom Lamb pers. comm. 25 April 2015).

HUMC has been widely recognized for their habitat and energy work – most recently in receiving the Natural Resources Conservation 2015 Environmental Award from the City of Raleigh. Their community garden has been incredibly influential in helping other churches, schools, and homeowners start gardens: perhaps 95 gardens have been inspired or supported from here (Figure 2, Tom Lamb. pers. comm. 25 April 2015). Additionally, this congregation has the largest solar panel array on a church in Raleigh, being 47 kW (Figure 1, Tom Lamb, pers. comm 25 April 2015). Another asset of this congregation is their columbarium. Not only is it an aesthetically appealing example, but it was constructed by two of its congregants, providing potential partners for other faith communities.



Figure 1- HUMC 47 kW solar array



Figure 2- HUMC Community Garden

Stop # 2 | Community United Church of Christ (CUCC)

CUCC of Raleigh is also downtown and residential but is located on a smaller lot. Even though the grounds are not very large, they very intentionally arranged native plants around the building and have implemented many bird-friendly initiatives, including the use of bird tape on their windows. The intersection of Audubon's Bird Friendly Communities program and faith communities was explicitly addressed in this setting through a presentation by Kim Brand of Audubon NC, followed by an introduction to the grounds of Community United Church of Christ by Lena Gallitano, a member of this congregation who is also involved with Audubon NC.

This congregation is also active in solar energy outreach, maintaining a how-to blog⁵ after successfully leading a fundraising campaign to raise enough funds from outside its membership to supplement member donations to purchase a 10 kW solar-electric system. One of the key organizers, Gary Smith, discussed how CUCC was able to accomplish this to the tour group (Figure 3).

⁵ <http://cuccsolarproject.blogspot.com/p/main-page.html>



Figure 3- Gary Smith of Community United Church of Christ, discussing donation model after successful CUCC campaign

An important take away from Gary’s talk was that the “right” financing mechanism for solar energy varies by congregation and its congregants (Gary Smith pers. comm. 25 April 2015). The physical setting of a faith community’s building as well as the financial capacity and interests of its congregants are highly important. Further, different financing models require differing amounts of an organization’s time. These tradeoffs are important to consider given the resources of the congregation. In addition to CUCC’s blog, a helpful guide to financing solar for faith communities is offered by NCIPL.⁶

⁶ <http://www.ncipl.org/solar-clearinghouse/>

Stop # 3 | Western Boulevard Presbyterian Church (WBPC)

Our last site visit was to WBPC, a residential urban church, which also hosts a community garden. The Youth Faith Conservation Network has installed five Brown-headed Nuthatch nesting boxes, and one is currently occupied by the target species and feeding its hatchlings. The congregation is a certified Earth Care Congregation as certified by the Presbyterians for Earth Care.

This stop featured Owen Clapp, a YFCN participant and WBPC member, to share his project focusing on installing solar panels within his congregation. The content he shared was not focused on providing new financing mechanisms for solar or technical details. However, he shared best practices for working with youth. His powerful suggestion was to outline an issue for youth to pursue while not proscribing a solution for them to follow so that they may be guided by their own passion (Owen Clapp, pers. comm 25 April 2015).

At Western Boulevard, we served lunch to participants at two tables, and had paper and crayons on each table for an asset-mapping activity. This resulted in two very different maps, one of physical resources and two potential sites for native plant habitat designs (Figure 4), and one that was more conceptual and focused on bringing different actors together to ultimately result in political activism for environmental initiatives (Figure 5).

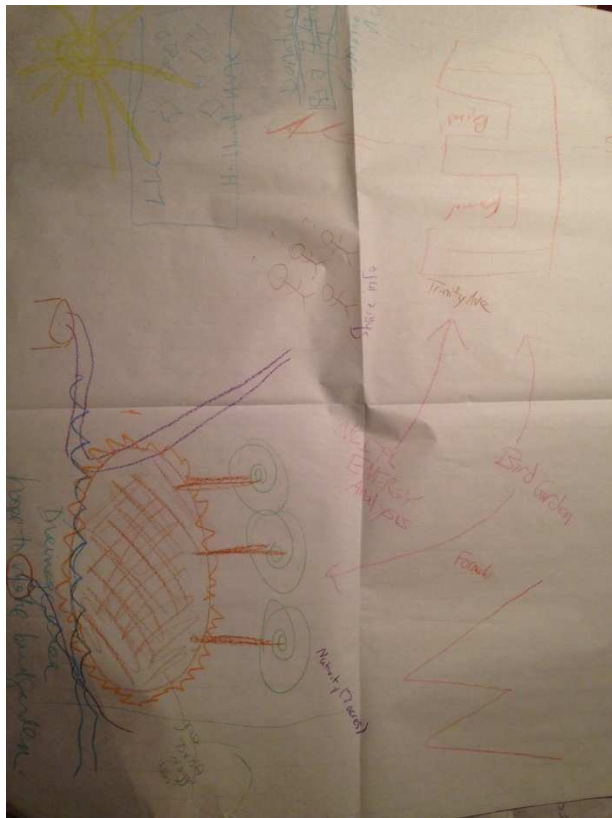
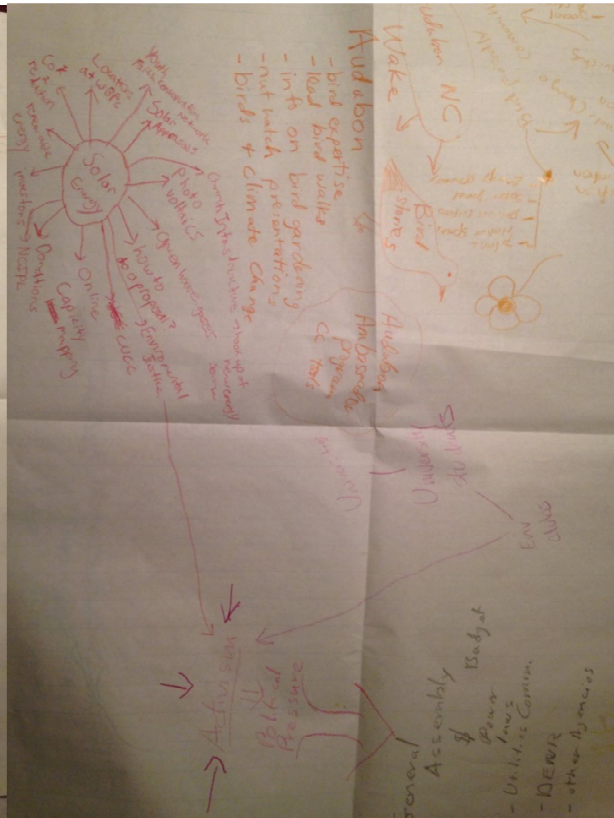


Figure 4- Church of the Nativity and Trinity Avenue Pres



| Figure 5- Audubon NC, Activism, Env. Justice, and Solar Energy

Two native plant habitat demonstration sites or bird gardens are being planned by the YFCN for faith community grounds. Participants from Trinity Avenue Presbyterian (Durham) and Church of the Nativity Episcopal (Raleigh) expressed interest in working with the YFCN to install native plant habitat demonstration sites at their congregations, as depicted in Figure 4 above. This potential interest was expressed during the asset-mapping exercise. As can be seen in this map, the asset mapping provided an avenue to articulate this interest spatially in terms of the particular setting of these congregations by the congregants themselves. The building of Trinity Avenue Presbyterian appears as an “E” shape. The building is represented by the lines and the area in between the lines forms two inset areas of the grounds. In one of these inset areas, Trinity Avenue Presbyterian has a formal garden and there is potential for a bird garden or native plant habitat demonstration site in the other compartment. In the case of the grounds of Church of the Nativity, indicated to be 7 acres, a 75x75 foot drainage area was identified and drawn as a potential area for a bird garden. This area is on a bit of a slope and would require selection of water-tolerant plants.

These identified sites present a follow up opportunity to engage the networks of NCIPL and Audubon to collaborate on the design, installation, and maintenance of bird gardens or native plant habitat demonstration sites within these specific faith community settings.

Lessons Learned

In addition to showcasing the habitat and energy practices at these faith communities, the tour provided space for conversation and exchange of ideas on how to successfully implement energy and habitat initiatives. For instance, the tour witnessed photovoltaic panels but additionally explored nuanced and innovative approaches for financing solar. In this way, the tour approach presents an opportunity to explore unique solutions to common challenges in habitat and energy given the particular settings of each participant’s faith community. Such explorations are grounded in “best practices,” if designed well, so as to be both informed and relevant within a wider context.

An option for subsequent tours is to very intentionally include a wide diversity of sites across various demographic measures in order to display best practices in a way which is responsive to environmental justice concerns. This same approach could be employed to seek participant diversity. The value of the tour format for awareness raising and agenda setting is expressed in a way which builds partnerships among the existing resources (stakeholders or best practices themselves) to focus on collaborating within particular settings or on particular practices. The tour in itself would not be able to help with the cause of environmental justice. However, the qualities of the tour seem well suited to magnifying needs within the community which over are overlooked or are underappreciated.

Another opportunity presented by this tour was to create partnerships among generations by allowing a high school YFCN member, Owen in this case, to teach as well as learn from older participants. As suggested by Owen, it is important to maintain an educational atmosphere which defines issues instead of solutions. It is important to design the tour so that “best practices” witnessed do not become proscriptions to be adopted without adaptation to particular faith

community contexts. By including participants who belong to the faith communities visited on the tour for their best practices, it becomes apparent that these settings are not generalizable. The narratives that accompany the descriptions of the best practices are personal and intimate to their faith communities setting. The intimacy experienced in directly witnessing habitat and energy best practices in the context of their intertwined existence within very personal and human stories limits a sense of their offering as proscriptive solutions. The importance of sharing the human stories of these initiatives with human faces and voice should not be overlooked.

In order to expand the reach of another tour, it would be important to cultivate relationships with potential partner organizations and congregants well before the tour is to be planned. Further, to ensure measurable impact from these tours, participants must have the capacity to act on the ideas generated or there must be other capacity of other groups - such as Audubon, NCIPL and the YFCN - to help coordinate these follow-up efforts.

Lastly, the tour is an important outcome in that it successfully gathered key stakeholders to witness best practices and share stories (Figure 6).



Figure 6- Tour Participants

The value of the intermingling of networks represented in those who came together in this group is important and will be significant to build upon for future collaborations, starting with the installation of a couple of Brown-headed Nuthatch Nesting boxes and two bird gardens.

Appendix

Partner Organization Description (NCIPL)

NCIPL is a program of the North Carolina Council of Churches (NCCC) and a state chapter of National Interfaith Power and Light (IPL). These organizations operate differently and include constituencies of varying sizes. The NCCC network is by far the largest in number, representing 1.5 million congregants; the second largest network is National IPL which includes 14,000 participants; lastly, NCIPL's outreach involves over 250 participating congregations and includes approximately 4000 people in their database (S. Tuttle pers. comm. 2/5/15).