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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: June 29, 2012

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Community-supported solar project on Salem church to be dedicated July 1

One of the first and largest congregation-funded solar projects to tap Oregon's Solar Payments Pilot Program will be dedicated on July 1 at 11:45 a.m., with an educational program on solar from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. The 10 kw system using Oregon-manufactured Solar World panels is installed on the steeply pitched, south-facing roof of First Congregational Church, located at 700 Marion Street in Salem. The dedication is being held in conjunction with the 160th anniversary of the historic church, which started in a wooden pioneer structure.

The solar panels were installed in October 2011 with assistance from Oregon Interfaith Power & Light (OIPL), a program of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, and its Solar Congregations Equity Investors, Inc. (SCEI). Other technical assistance was provided by Steve McGrath of Sustainable Solutions and the energy division of Lane Powell Attorneys. The project's up-front costs were funded 100 percent by short and long-term loans by congregation members and friends. Short-term loans were paid back by a Federal Treasury Grant for renewable energy through project owner SCEI. Congress failed to renew the program at the end of 2011, eliminating a valuable resource for community-funded projects that lack tax liability.

The long-term loans are being repaid through the electricity generated by the panels and solar payments. Twenty-one church members contributed from \$500 to \$8,000 in personal loan funds. Due to extensive renovations required because of a water main break several years ago, the church was not in a position to put up its own funds. OIPL director, Jenny Holmes, says, "The members of this congregation were incredibly dedicated to the idea of supporting locally-produced renewable energy and caring for God's creation." The congregation, OIPL and contractors overcame numerous obstacles in coming up with a funding plan that worked, while dealing with a complex roof situation. There were narrow windows of time within which the church had to act to tap financial resources. "This congregation really pulled together in a fairly short period of time to make the project happen," Holmes said.

Oregon Interfaith Power & Light plans to use all that it has learned from the project to continue efforts to assist other congregations and ensure that policies and programs are more accessible to non-profits and congregations in the future. Although over 65 congregations in Oregon signed up for OIPL's Solar

MEMBER DENOMINATIONS

African Methodist Episcopal Church ■ American Baptist Churches of Oregon ■ Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) ■ Christian Methodist Episcopal Church ■ Church of the Brethren ■ Community of Christ
Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Oregon ■ Episcopal Diocese of Oregon ■ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America ■ Greek Orthodox Church ■ Presbyterian Church (USA)—Presbytery of the Cascades
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) ■ Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Portland ■ United Church of Christ ■ United Methodist Church ■ Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches

Congregations Program, which started in 2007, only three installations have been completed with two more underway. The down economy, complexity, and lack of stability in policies and incentives make it difficult to plan and raise funds for solar projects in a congregation or non-profit setting. However, as Holmes says, “First Congregational and our other projects show in spades that if there is a will and a prayer, there is a way—but with better policies and programs, it could be so much easier.”

For more information about EMO’s Oregon Interfaith Power & Light and its Solar Congregations Program, call (503) 221-1054, ext. 214, or go to www.emoregon.org/power_light.php.

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon’s (EMO) Oregon Interfaith Power & Light project engages the faith community to strive for accountability in our individual and collective energy decisions in an interdependent world. EMO is a statewide association of Christian denominations—including Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox bodies—congregations, ecumenical organizations and interfaith partners working together to improve the lives of Oregonians through community ministry programs, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, environmental ministry and public policy advocacy.