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## Perspectives - Alyssa Bellew of the Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church of Pasadena

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# THE ROOFTOPS PROJECT



## Perspectives

### Alyssa Bellew of the Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church of Pasadena

At many places of worship, responsibility for oversight of the physical facilities falls to administrative staff as one more adjunct to an already busy schedule. At others, property tasks may be left to volunteers. The “on-the-job training” may often be self-taught. **Professor James Hagy**, Director of The Rooftops Project, explores these challenges with **Alyssa Bellew**, Administrative Director of Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church of Pasadena, California.

**RTP:** You have been here at Neighborhood UU for eight years, and like the administrative directors at many places of worship, you have a broad range of responsibilities. How much of your time is spent on real estate and facilities, making the trains run?

**Alyssa:** Finance and facilities are my main priorities. I also do all of the business operations of the church, anything to do with facilities, money, personnel, and human resources. But the priorities for me and what keeps me busiest are finances and the facilities.

The facilities need more stewardship than the finances do, which sounds odd. But there are just not as many people providing the stewardship of the space. So it is easy for it to be neglected. People don’t tend to notice and start getting energy behind making an improvement until things get so deteriorated that it is close to too late. I take the facilities as one of my main priorities.

**RTP:** Neighborhood UU Church has a long history in Pasadena, long before it came to this site. How did the church end up on this campus?

**Alyssa:** A freeway was supposed to go through where the church’s original building was. We actually owned the oldest church in Pasadena at the time. The original building was built in 1885. The state bought the land in 1968 or 1969, told the church that a freeway was coming through, and raised the church quickly so that it would not be in people’s minds that it was sitting there. That freeway has never gone through. There is still no freeway.

**RTP:** From an architectural perspective, this is a pretty remarkable street. Your next-door neighbor is Gamble House, and the church building in which we are conducting this interview is Cole House. Both are celebrated Greene & Greene arts and crafts designs. Gamble house is now owned by the City of Pasadena and operated by the University of Southern California. The balance of the street has also been used for educational purposes, recently changing hands from Pacific Oaks College to the Institute for the Redesign of Learning/ The Almansor Center for students with autism spectrum disorders.

**Alyssa:** Pacific Oaks College used to have a couple different locations that comprised their college campuses. Their Westmoreland property was on this private drive on the other side of Gamble. It still looks like two old nice houses with big green lawns in front and a big curving drive.

**RTP:** What was the block like when Neighborhood UU acquired the property more than 40 years ago?

**Alyssa:** This was three residential properties—One, Two, and Three Westmoreland Place—when the church bought it. In its heyday this was a very affluent area. There were six private homes on this street, which was a private street. During the late 1960s, this neighborhood in Pasadena had become very run-down. Several of these buildings were empty. There were squatters and various things going on.



The church saved this building [the Cole House], the house in the middle, for office space and other uses. The other two buildings were either less historically significant or were in much worse repair at the time, so the church decided to tear them down and build the sanctuary where number one was and build the programs building where number three was.

My predecessor once removed, the administrator before the administrator before me, who is still a member here at this church, will jokingly say to me whenever there are repairs or something needed here, "I told them to tear this down when they had the chance." In the late 1960s or early 1970s, craftsman was not a desirable architectural style, it was just considered outdated. Some of that attitude is reflected in how some of the original features were removed, or painted over, or covered up. Now it is an entirely different story. There is quite a bit of passion from both the congregation and the community in keeping it in good repair and as authentic as it can.

**RTP:** Is this building protected, as well?

**Alyssa:** It is not, thankfully in some ways. It is tricky. It is historically significant, not just because it is craftsman but also because it was designed by the Greene brothers. As far as their particular architecture goes, it is not extremely significant except this is their first design where they included a porte cochère.

## Greene & Greene

Born in Ohio and educated at M.I.T., the Greene brothers came to California, establishing their Pasadena architectural practice in 1894. Like Frank Lloyd Wright, one of the influences on their style was Japanese design. Engaged by the Coles to design their house which is now the Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church of Pasadena offices, their work was admired by David Berry Gamble of the Procter & Gamble dynasty. Having just purchased the parcel of land next door, Gamble hired Greene & Greene for that design project as well. The Gamble House remained in the Gamble family until donated to the City of Pasadena and transferred to the care of the University of Southern California in the 1960s. It is recognized as a prime surviving example of Greene & Greene's work.

**RTP:** How does the architectural history of the property influence the way you maintain and operate it for your core mission as a place of worship?

**Alyssa:** We had a 100-year anniversary celebration of the Cole House a few years ago, because it was built in 1906. Some within the congregation are so focused on the historical significance of the house that they would like us to do things that would put it back like a house. Yet the church's main priority for the building is as the center of our operations, our staff office building. Really anything we do inside the building needs to make it appropriate to run the business of the church.

That being said, if there are choices we can make that would be a good business decision—window coverings for example, it doesn't matter what window coverings we get—then we'll pick some that are more historically significant. But as far as lighting, we are not going to buy Tiffany, craftsman-style lamps for the staff meeting room. There are those that think we should go back and make those kinds of improvements and restore it like an original house, so sometimes it is a blessing and a curse to have an historic building like that.

It is a delicate balance. We put quite a bit of money, over \$100,000, into this house two or three years ago, repairing the exterior. One or two years before, the Gamble House had just finished a multi-million-dollar preservation to the exterior of that house. There were some members of the congregation that wanted us to hire the similar kinds of firms that Gamble hired, to do a pre-assessment. First you hire them and they charge you just to tell you what should be done. Then you hire another firm to do the work.

We were at a point where we had to define what our business is and really say, "This is our mission." Their mission [at the Gamble House] is to run a museum, to preserve that house, so all of their money goes to that. Completely different than us. There is nothing in our mission about this house or preserving our properties, nothing at all. Any amount of money is coming out of funds that could do anything, be feeding the homeless, growing Unitarian Universalism; we could be doing so many other things. . . .

**RTP:** Increasing staff salaries . . . just an idea. [smiles]

**Alyssa:** There was so much deferred maintenance when the current senior minister and I first came in 2004. This house, for example, was all one color. The whole entire house was painted black. We said, "Yes, we'll try to keep it looking nice, and we'll pick a color palette that will be appropriate for this style house and that will go with the rest of the campus, and make some of these other decisions. But we need to make it clear that we are not a museum, this is not part of our mission."

But it is also not appropriate for us to completely neglect the building, which had been done. Every single roof rafter is classic arts and crafts design, the extended rafter tails. Well, you extend the rafter tails and they are going to get rotted. So every single rafter tail on this house, over 100, the ends of each one were rotted. So, there is the decision. Do you cut them off? There is this material like "Bondo®" for cars, but this is actually called Abatron, which is a newer material. Basically, you can patch the rafters, you can cut them off, all kinds of different things. What were we going to choose to do, what was the most appropriate for our use of the space?

My philosophy is nothing new: take care of it now because it will cost us a lot more money later. Had we not done the work replacing the roof and the rafter tails, once wood opens up, it is going to start rotting.

**RTP:** What about the more recently constructed buildings on your campus?

**Alyssa:** Even our newer buildings, to complement the rest of the campus, are designed in a contemporary craftsman style. Now we have mixing of materials, we have stucco with wood, and when you put two different building materials together, there is going to be water intrusion. It is almost never a good idea. There is always going to be something happening there. So all the wood on that building is constantly needing to be re-stained. It is splitting and cracking. So we have all these wood buildings around here that require so much maintenance.

The campus has lots of trees, and there are termites. Mega-churches are smart because they are in these tilt-up industrial buildings where there is no maintenance, and they don't need to worry one bit about maintenance. All of their money and energy can go toward their mission.

**RTP:** Did you have a facilities background before you came here or is it all on-the-job training?



**Alyssa:** No, most of this I have picked up since I have been working here. Personally it is something that interests me. I am sort of a do-it-yourselfer, and I do a lot of my own work on my house, so it appeals to me and it is something I like to learn about. But most of it I have learned doing it here.

**RTP:** How did you educate yourself about the different choices when you started the renovations on the Cole House?

**Alyssa:** I talked to a lot of people and just listened. I talked to Ted Bosley over at Gamble [he is the Director]. He put me in touch with the company that came out and did the assessment that told them what they needed to do. I had firms like that, historical architectural firms, that came out and gave me pitches when they knew that we were interested in doing work here.

We put together a small task force, including a church member who owns his own property and is a property manager, and church members who are contractors. They were advising me, and we were working together to decide the best plan of action. At that point, we weren't sure which route we were going to go and what needed to be done. So it was a good educational opportunity for me, and for the rest of the group.

Then, we went directly to contractors, and had them come out and tell us what we need to do, and how they would do it. It was probably a good year that we spent talking about doing the work on the house before we started work. And then another several months of repairs while it was happening.

**RTP:** A lot of not-for-profits with which we talk may face a major facilities issue for the first time and think, rightly perhaps, "Gosh, this is really complicated." So they tell us that they sometimes do nothing, they retreat, because it is so hard and they are afraid to make a mistake.

**Alyssa:** That is easy to do. I don't think I would ever have chosen to do nothing at all, just seeing how much worse it makes it for you to do nothing. But there are some challenges in thinking about the fallout.

One of the most difficult things that I have found to navigate in this job is to understand my role. You may find that with other organizations, but it may be particularly true for organizations like this that are member organizations. I was in the insurance industry for 20 years. I was used to knowing exactly, from the first day I started, "This is your job, here is the manual, here is somebody who has done your job before, they are going to train you, and there are a hundred more around the country you can call at any moment who can help you. Here is your job description; do it."

Understanding the delicate balance—especially in a church that has evolved and is evolving—is different. Whose decision is this? Can I pull the trigger? Do I ask the board? Do I ask the senior minister? I am going to change the shade of brown. I am going to repaint those railings. Can I just do it?

**RTP:** As you know, my wife and I happen to be Unitarians. Luckily Unitarians never have an opinion as church members, so I am sure that makes it easy. [laughter]

**Alyssa:** Some things I just learned the hard way. I had the roofs replaced on these two buildings, and I had them all re-stained. I just decided if I do them the same color, that is safest. If it was my own house, and I was choosing the colors, would I have done it the same? Probably not.

If you are a typical nonprofit where you are just in a storefront or an office space, and really your focus is on your programs, your mission, and what you are doing for people, then it may be much less stressful to make those kinds of decisions. But when you have people showing up here, where part of their valuing of the institution is the grounds and the space, and how it makes them feel, when you know you are making decisions about things like that, there is a feeling of much more pressure about making the right decision.

**RTP:** Is there a board level property committee, or how does the board involve itself with property and facilities issues?

**Alyssa:** There isn't a property committee. The church has been moving toward a Policy Governance® model since I got here. But it depends who the president is that year. If you have a president, for example, who is retired, and who used to work in finance let's say, they may take more interest in the books. Someone who is working, and really busy, may think, "My role is to oversee the working of the church, and to make policy, and to make sure that the policies are upheld, but not really to go into the books." It differs each year depending on who is the president, and who is the treasurer.

There used to be many different board committees here, the grounds committee, buildings committee, different committees. As policy governance has taken hold, many of those committees have gone by the wayside as more and more authority is given to the staff, through the senior minister. The staff is being trusted to make those executive decisions and not have a handful of church members deciding what shade of green the church should be.

In some ways it is good, in some ways bad. It is good because if I see something that needs to be done from a facilities standpoint, I don't have to wait until a bunch of people decide. I can say the wood is splitting, it needs to be re-stained, and this color looks a little bit better. Call the contractor. Get the best price and best work. I say, "Do it," get the check and it is done.

### Policy Governance®

Policy Governance®, the full title of which is the Carver Policy Governance® Model, is a proprietary theory and method of governance often discussed in not-for-profit circles including member organizations like places of worship. It was created by Dr. John Carver, who has written extensively about his approach over several decades beginning with his book, *Boards That Make a Difference: A New Design for Leadership in Nonprofit and Public Organizations*, first published in 1990. These writings lay out in detail Dr. Carver's system for defining the role of boards in setting policy and measuring results, while entrusting implementation and operations to staff. Dr. Carver and his wife, Miriam Carver, make clear on their website that use of the model is free and does not require a royalty payment or license, but that they maintain their site to provide a clear and accurate view of their concept. For more information on the theory of Policy Governance®, you may go to [www.carvergovernance.com/model.htm](http://www.carvergovernance.com/model.htm).

**RTP:** How do you fund facilities costs?

**Alyssa:** We have a maintenance reserve, and we put at least \$15,000 into the annual operating budget. So without needing to go to the board or anybody,



I have at least \$15,000 for maintenance and another \$10,000–15,000 for equipment maintenance and repair. Those two things together are usually enough to do the average annual repairs around the campus. In that regard, I can do what needs to be done, cracks in the sidewalk, or flooding over there that requires adding a drain, without convening the maintenance committee.

**RTP:** How does day-to-day maintenance work? Do you have someone on staff that takes care of the facility? Do you have an outside contractor?

**Alyssa:** We have a custodial team. We have a custodial presence on the campus here from 7 in the morning until 10 at night, seven days a week. A lot of that is because of the activities we have going on around here, not always to be doing custodial work, but also helping with set-up.

**RTP:** The facilities staff is payroll staff, not independent contractors?

**Alyssa:** Yes.

**RTP:** Many not-for-profits, perhaps especially places of worship, often struggle with how to enable the use of their facilities during the week by their members or visitors while still keeping control of keys and access. The presence of your paid staff for such extended hours during the week must really help in addressing these access and security issues. The staff is responsible for opening, closing, and securing the building, not the volunteers?

**Alyssa:** Yes. And if somebody really needs a key, they get the least amount of access for their use. We have to sign keys in and out, we have them categorized and itemized, we keep an account inventory of the keys.

We really don't like giving anybody a key who doesn't absolutely need to have it. Our president doesn't have a key. Nobody on the board has a key. What does our president need a key for? The board meeting room is opened when there is a board meeting, and locked up afterward. If there is an emergency meeting, they just call the facilities coordinator and it will be opened for you.

It is a tough one, because members here remember the days when they could just come in. When you came to the front door today, you had to buzz. Not everybody likes that. Some long-standing church members say they remember when they could walk right in. But things change.

**RTP:** The facilities seem very active as we sit here together on a Monday morning.

**Alyssa:** You should see a Wednesday night here, it is almost as busy as yesterday [Sunday] was. We have not only a lot of church committees and groups, but a lot of outside groups have their weekly or monthly meetings here on our campus. So we have a lot of activity here.

**RTP:** You have an outside organization that runs a school here?

**Alyssa:** Yes, we have two schools here. Both are shared lease arrangements. We use the space on the weekends and they have it Monday through Friday. We have a pre-school, and then we have a 1–12 Catholic school. The Catholic school is in all of the classrooms in the program buildings. We have 10 classrooms. They use the sanctuary for morning assembly, they use the grounds for recess and lunch. The only spaces they are not using full time

for classrooms now are the chapel and the sanctuary. Our private, gated playground area is used by the pre-school Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., and then on the weekends and evenings it is ours.

**RTP:** You said that other outside organizations use meeting rooms in Cole House, in addition to the possibility of events that may be held in the chapel and sanctuary?

**Alyssa:** A lot. We also have a part-time facility coordinator. Her job is to coordinate every single activity that happens on this campus she knows about. She is in charge of the reservations calendar for the church and any outside group. If any church group, staff member, or outside group wants to use space for anything, they go through her. She knows about everything. She arranges the fees, collects the money, writes up the contracts, handles all of that. She facilities and works directly with the custodians—the set-up, what time to open the rooms, special equipment needs for the space. Whether that is a regular meeting or some big party or wedding or something that we have here, she handles that.

**RTP:** How do you think about pricing? Do you find that hard, or easy? Or do you go by what you have done in the past and nudge it up every once in a while?

**Alyssa:** At least once a year we look at that, and we look at our pricing philosophy or methodology, to see whether that is similar to what our competition might be. Our competition could be retreat space, it could be wedding and wedding reception space, it could be a space to have a memorial service, it could be where an outside organization can have weekly or monthly board meetings, and so on. So we try to look at all of that and make sure that our prices are competitive.

**RTP:** It sounds like you have a pretty good grasp of your costs. We talk to a lot of organizations that either deliberately or by accident host outside organizations. Some examine their revenues and discover that they are not even covering their costs. They may set and reset a room, bring in the custodial staff or an outside contractor. If they don't match the bills for that to the events, they may not be aware that they are losing money.

**Alyssa:** That is something we have gone through as well. If you are a church . . . I guess you don't have to be a church . . . if you are a nonprofit, as part of your mission you may want to make your space available to other nonprofits that have a similar mission and similar vision in the community. Do we need to make money, or merely need not to lose money?

What we have done is sit down and look at every single contract, and look at what those contracts were costing us for utilities, and janitorial, and wear and tear on the space. It was costing us money to have some of these groups here. We did an inventory of every group that is coming here, no matter how long they have been coming. Are they coming at a time that is in high demand or low demand? Then we looked at it and we asked, "What do we need to be charging?"

What really got us looking at that is if the custodian took a day off, or if someone called in sick . . . people tend to call in sick on Mondays, no matter what business you are in. When we would have to scramble around to make sure someone could be here to unlock for an outside group (our other staff work Sundays so they don't typically work on Mondays), if the custodian wasn't here, it made it more apparent. We were almost paying them to have the space here.





Then we started looking at other groups as well. We had one group that had been coming here forever. They were paying \$25. And they wanted us to provide a coffee setup every morning they were here. This is fair-trade, organic coffee we are using here. Just the coffee alone is probably worth \$10.

We did a complete assessment. Some groups left, some groups stayed.

**RTP:** Some organizations may have a less thorough process, but have also not come to emotional grips with the fact that some of the organizations may decide to leave until they are actually in the room having the discussion about changing the relationship. So if you don't know what your reaction will be to that, it is harder to manage the meeting. It sounds like when you went through that internal process, you were prepared that some of the groups might end up leaving?

**Alyssa:** We did not have an issue with that. I think my responsibility, as the person who is responsible for both the facilities and the finances of the church, is to look at the income, to ask whether this group is helping us serve our mission. And wear and tear on the space as well. If it is a low-impact group, they just sit in the chairs that are already there, they just come in and sit around and chit chat, it is a time of day when there is not likely to be a lot of heat or air on, they never have any food or drink, and they just leave, and they say, "Can't you just do \$5 less?"—I am much more likely to do that. But groups where we have to rearrange the room, we have to make coffee, may be different.

**RTP:** Not-for-profits have such different missions and facilities needs, but one thing they all have in common is restrooms. Every organization has a story or a challenge about restrooms. You must have one?

**Alyssa:** We couldn't figure out for the life of us why, in the downstairs restroom in the programs building, in the accessible stall, the end stall, the big wide stall, the toilet paper holder kept getting ripped off the wall and just pulled down. We'd patch it and put it back and it would get ripped down again. Then we figured out that because it is below the window, little girls would stand on it to look out the window and mess around with the other kids outside the window.

In the restrooms where the kids are, the stalls don't last that long. It is like a monkey bar up there, it's perfect. They want to climb on everything. They sit on the counters. The counters are going to pull out from the walls. They don't turn the faucets off. If the toilet flushes and continues to run, they are going to laugh first for about 30 minutes before coming to tell you, or lift the handle back up. You have to think about things very seriously in a kids' bathroom.

You will also come to see that kids will drag their hands along the wall, they walk and drag their hands on the way. That is what they do.

Until you have a school on your campus, and until you see things through the eyes of a kid, only then can you really think about these things. The church designed this building for our kids. But these things we didn't think about.

**RTP:** What about the experience for your adult members and visitors?

**Alyssa:** Personally, one thing I think about with bathrooms is like people visiting your home. People are going to snoop and to form an impression about you from the bathroom.

This is why I am jockeying to get the sanctuary restrooms updated somehow. People who come to our church service, who are forming an impression about our church and whether we are a thriving, exuberant, well run church,

are going to be showing up on a Sunday. They are going to be sitting in the chairs, they are going to be looking around, about how nice and neat is it, how welcoming are we. If the bathrooms are 30 years old and dated, even if your custodians get down and scrub on their hands and knees—which most won't—even if you clean it as best you can, they are going to look dirty anyway. If it looks old and tired, then there is a perception that your organization is old and tired.

We have newer seats in the sanctuary, and we have a new sound system and lighting, and the house is all painted, and everything looks great. But if there is still the old yellow countertop and the old gross tiles on the floor, we need to do something about that. It makes the wrong impression.

**RTP:** The Unitarian Universalist Association has educational resources and a certification process for its member churches to promote sustainability in their physical facilities. Have you participated in that program?

**Alyssa:** The designation is "Green Sanctuary," but it doesn't mean just the sanctuary but the campus overall. So we have implemented the UU program "Green Sanctuary" for the whole campus.

**RTP:** How hard was that?

**Alyssa:** I think of it like doing your taxes. It isn't hard, it is just tedious. You have a lot of things to do and it just takes a long time.

**RTP:** Was this member driven or staff driven?

**Alyssa:** It was member driven and staff supported. Some things I did, like organizing and obtaining energy audits, things I felt were in the church's best interests to have the office initiate and hear directly what the feedback was. Those were conducted with the volunteer leaders present, so we were all there together. And that worked well. The leaders took it as their responsibility to get all the check marks that were necessary to get us "Green Sanctuary" status and to manage the list of what was left to do. It was about a two-year process.

### UUA GREEN SANCTUARY

You can learn more about the Unitarian Universalist Association's Green Sanctuary Program at [www.uua.org/environment/sanctuary/](http://www.uua.org/environment/sanctuary/).

**RTP:** As I recall, there is an educational or programmatic requirement to the certification process, too?

**Alyssa:** We had a huge community green fair here on the campus, the largest one that had been in the City of Pasadena up to that point. We had about 1,000 people. It was big and publicized in the community. We had solar panel displays, and organic gardening groups, and Pasadena Water and Power, electric bicycle and car vendors here, and all different kinds of groups. That was one educational piece. We have a demonstration rain garden out in the back, we have a community compost bin here.

**RTP:** And perhaps a recycling center for members? I am carrying around my two used batteries. . . .



**Alyssa:** Do you have any CFL bulbs with you? We can recycle those, too. [laughter]

**RTP:** What were your first steps in sustainability upgrades for the facilities?

**Alyssa:** We started out by replacing the toilets first. We replaced them with low-flush toilets, the basic less gallons per flush. In our early beginnings, a lot of this stuff was free or really, really inexpensive. I am a bargain shopper.

I developed a really great working relationship with our representative from Pasadena Water and Power, just from her coming out and talking to us. We hit it off and clicked, and I talked to her about our vision, and what the church is all about. Pasadena Water and Power I really appreciate, because they are big but not too big. They have a lot of lofty goals about reducing energy and water consumption in the city, so if they know commercial customers who are on board, they will try to make things available to you.

It has been really instrumental in what we have done here. If they have a pilot program that they are not sure they want to roll out and make generally available, I have gotten calls once or twice a year, saying that "Pasadena Water and Power recommended you guys. We'll come out and install it completely free, 100 percent free. We're going to put UVC emitters on all of your HVAC units." OK. What does that do? It regulates your units, and reduces your energy consumption by 20 percent.

Or, "Anyplace you have fluorescents, we are going to put in daylight harvesting ballasts." Beyond the office, almost all of these classrooms, they came out and installed them absolutely free. So if you are in a room with a lot of sunlight, like my office upstairs which has a lot of light in the morning, it will dim them automatically, and then adjust them during the day. It reads the amount of daylight already coming in and adjusts the light for how much you need, so you are using less energy.

**RTP:** Ah, so tell me about bulbs for a minute. You still have some incandescent?

**Alyssa:** We shouldn't. We should have LED now. First we got free CFLs for the whole entire campus. And then two years later, another program gave us free LEDs for the entire campus.

**RTP:** You have some cans that are pretty high, hard to replace, in the sanctuary?

**Alyssa:** We have overhead fluorescent T-bars in the sanctuary. We just upgraded from T-12s to T-8s, and we qualified for a rebate for that. Some of the stuff is a no-brainer. How much is the ballast? Our custodians can replace the ballasts, or our sound and lighting volunteers. I replaced the ballast in my office myself; it is not that hard. If your water and power company is giving rebates, and you do the math and it is a one-year payback, a one-year payback is nothing. Our new cool roof is close to a three- or four-year payback. But even a 10-year payback is worth it, because after 10 years it has paid for itself.

**RTP:** Is the congregation informed and engaged in this ongoing effort?

**Alyssa:** I put it in the newsletter, because I think the congregation will be proud that we are doing this. I do the stats, and tell them this many bulbs, this many watts. Over this many years, we'll be saving this much. This is equal to the energy to power a small village here, or it could do that, so they think about it in that way. . . ."

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