

# Discerners go solar!

BY ANGELA GOLAPI PALMA, CSC

Sunlight is necessary to support and sustain life. Many people throughout Asia consider the sun to be a powerful god. In my country, Bangladesh, the Garo people believe that Suljung, the sun, is the source of all power.

In my own life I have learned to appreciate the power of the sun. When I was in school, I learned how to use solar heat to cook rice. At our mission in Jalchatra, we used a solar water heater to warm our bath water during winter. A Holy Cross brother taught us to make solar stoves so we could cook without cutting down trees for firewood.

While I was in Ghana, we sisters tried to build a solar stove. Despite our best efforts, we could not make it work. But when we went to celebrate the feast of Christ the King in a fishing village near the Atlantic Ocean, we stayed in a house where everything was operated by solar power, even their refrigerator! I was very interested in learning how this worked, and the owner willingly shared all the information with me.

When I went to Bangalore, I noticed yellow tanks on the roof of almost every home. I learned that these tanks were solar water heaters.

Now I am living with young women who are discerning the call to religious life. The discerners' program includes two years of study at Holy Cross College. We need access to a reliable source of power and light so the young women can study at night. I asked for permission to have solar panels installed at our house, but initially this request was denied. We tried to get by with lanterns and charger lights, but power was unreliable. This was frustrating for the discerners.

As an alternative, I studied the feasibility and cost of using Integrated Power Systems (IPS) and was ready to sign up for this service. But before I did, I talked with a Holy Cross brother who is an expert on solar power systems. After our conversation I had a very strong feeling that I should try one more time to get approval for the installation of solar panels. I contacted our area coordinator, and we had a good conversation



ABOVE: Discerners work by solar light.



TOP: Workers install a solar panel on the roof.

RIGHT: Sister Angela Golapi Palma shows off the solar battery panel and light.



about the pros and cons of both IPS and solar. This time she said yes to solar. I felt happy and so grateful. I cancelled IPS right away and contacted Grameen Shakti, part of the Grameen Bank that is bringing affordable solar power to rural areas of Bangladesh.

A few days later, three men came with everything they needed to install the solar system. First, they put the panel on the roof and connected the battery that is charged by the sun. The men worked for a whole day and put eight lights in different rooms, including the chapel, community room, veranda, hallway, kitchen and dining room.

That evening, when it got dark, we turned on the solar light for the first time. The house was bright; everyone had enough light to study and work. We do not buy kerosene anymore, and we use the savings to pay for our solar system. No more running for matches to light the lanterns, and no more smoke from the lantern's flame. Now we are breathing cleaner air and living in a healthier environment.

When we purchased the Discerners' House, we named it Proggalaya, or Wisdom. We are grateful that our congregation has the wisdom to employ a renewable source of power to meet our needs. We hope and pray that this wise use of Earth's natural resources will spread throughout the congregation and beyond.