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SUSTAINABILITY AND RECYCLING: THE DECEMBER SERVICE PROJECT

Three Christmases ago, a group of Dordt students asked: can we do something kingdom-oriented at this time of year? That question led to a new tradition, the December Service Project, a student-led initiative to observe the season through acts of service.

The first year, the Ebola outbreak was at its peak, and students decided to help children in Liberia who had lost their parents to the disease. Through pledges and fundraisers, they raised \$18,000 to build a children's home. The second year, students worked to increase awareness of human trafficking by observing "Dressember." Along with fundraising, many students wore formal attire for the month of December, a reminder of the desire to return dignity to those who have been mistreated and abused.

Aaron Baart, Dordt's dean of chapel, says, "The December service project bubbles up from the student body. Students really have a heart for this."

This year, the project focused on sustainable living. Some students learned that Dordt spends \$47,000 a year on garbage removal, and they saw little initiative among fellow students to steward campus resources. The group decided to take action. They applied for and were awarded grant money from several donors, including Young Evangelicals for Climate Action. They also challenged Dordt's administration to match funds so they could buy new recycling bins. The college not only matched the funds, it contributed more than three times what the students raised and also created two permanent work-study positions so students could continue to explore ways to increase sustainability on campus.

But this year's project benefitted more



PHOTO SUBMITTED

A team of Dordt students traveled to Liberia to install solar panels at Abide in the Vine Disciples Church. The panels will save the church roughly \$3,000 each year.

than just Dordt. The money saved by reducing garbage removal funded a partnership between Dordt students and Abide in the Vine Disciples Church in Liberia. Over Christmas break, a Dordt team installed a solar panel to increase energy efficiency on the church campus and save roughly \$3,000 a year. They also partnered with community members to set up a school library, a computer lab with 60 new computers, and solar-powered fencing for a goat farm.

"It's using our sense of creation care to teach other people about creation care," says Baart.

Why is it important for students to be involved in this kind of work? "The

biggest reason is allowing students to become aware of what God is doing elsewhere in the world," says Baart. "I think part of God's command for mission isn't just to save the world, but to save us from ourselves—to pull us outside of our individualism. Working on this project transforms students for the rest of their lives."

Renee Ewald, a junior biology major, helped spearhead this year's project. "When I arrived as a freshman from Northern British Columbia, I was shocked at how little recycling was happening on campus." Ewald now chairs Dordt's sustainability committee, which helps administration, students, and others create a more sustainable campus.

The committee saw December's recycling project as a way to help students know what they could and could not recycle. They also hoped to create a better recycling system, using money as motivation (it costs Dordt \$10 more per cubic yard to remove garbage than recycled materials).

The project is working. After just seven days, maintenance reported the amount of recycled materials had doubled. The increase has held for months.

Dr. Jeff Ploegstra, who teaches biology and environmental studies, notes that recycling reduces our global consumptive pattern—our impact on other creatures and other spaces. That is why the students planned the Liberia project.

"If you really want to love people," Ploegstra says, "you have to also love the place they live. To say that you love somebody, while at the same time



Students on the sustainability committee worked hard to raise awareness about the importance of recycling on campus. Aside from reducing Dordt's carbon footprint, the resulting increase in the amount of materials being recycled on campus means significant cost-savings for the college.

promoting practices that impoverish the environment they live in, is really problematic. Healthy people come from healthy places. You need to step back and look at the whole network.”

But wasn't creation made for human beings? And isn't environmental care a "secular" issue?

“Not at all!” Ploegstra says. “In the Noahic covenant, God made a covenant with all creatures. Look through the Old Testament—God says people are to treat the land in particular ways. The land itself is to have a Sabbath. We are a unique part of creation: but not the only part. In the Bible 'ruling' always means 'serving.'”

Environmental care is not a new idea. It's part of the rich history of Reformed theology and its guiding trajectory of Creation-Fall-Redemption. Reformed Christians have always believed that creation has intrinsic value, and God calls humanity to care for it.

“I think our actions toward the

environment have an eternal impact,” says Ploegstra. “To me, part of being faithful is being committed to the idea that God loves what he has made. Creation is good and something we should desire to care for.”

Next semester, the student committee will focus on composting—providing a place for people to put their food waste to help reduce the amount of harmful methane gas released into the atmosphere. They hope to keep finding ways to improve sustainability on campus.

Asked how she would encourage her fellow students, Ewald replied, “Think about the impact of your actions. When you throw something in the trash that could be recycled, it contributes to a larger problem. Not one of us, on our own, has the ability to change the world in a drastic way. But when we work together, we can make a difference.”

KATE HENRECKSON

Dordt's campus was recently ranked no. 2 in a list of the “25 Most Beautiful Colleges and Universities in the Midwest 2017” by Christian Universities Online. That has a lot to do with stewardship of campus grounds and resources. Stan Oordt, director of the Dordt physical plant, says of the maintenance team, “They take such good of the campus because they know that their work glorifies God, and we want to take the best of care with what God has entrusted to us.”

ON THE MARGINS

Americans generate a lot of waste. That's one reason the United States is a primary contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions. Yet, thanks to technology, many of us don't suffer the effects of these emissions. Scientists have shown that carbon emissions contribute to environmental instability over time. But for many Americans, unpredictable weather is simply inconvenient: if it gets warm, we can turn on the AC.

For others, it can be catastrophic. Farmers in Africa, for instance, depend for their livelihood on predictable rain. They don't have the financial resources to protect themselves from changes in the environment around them, and that can lead to starvation. Yet subsistence farmers are among the least responsible for the emissions that cause these changes.

Environmental change can also affect global politics. An article in the *Scientific American* describes how the recent drought in Syria helped pave the way for the current civil war. The drought “destroyed agriculture, causing many farm families to migrate to cities. The influx added to social stresses already created by refugees pouring in from the war in Iraq.” Current research suggests that this is not an anomaly: drought increases the potential for violent conflict worldwide.

In the end, it comes down to loving our neighbor—and students on Dordt's sustainability committee are doing their small part. By reducing campus waste, the Dordt community is actually caring for “the least of these”: people on the margins of society, who are most vulnerable to the effects of global waste.

For more on how our stewardship of resources affects society's most vulnerable members, see *Loving the Least of These: Addressing a Changing Environment*, by Dorothy Boorse.