

Earth-Friendly Audit

Introduction

The preamble of *The Earth Charter* states: "We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace." Retrieved from <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org>, on October 16, 2009.

The School Sisters of St. Francis (SSSF) found these values to be consistent with their Franciscan charism to work toward justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. These values are reflected in their approach to promoting a sustainable environment:

- Justice: Economic prosperity that does not exploit those who are poor and vulnerable
- Peace: Social advancement that assures the respect of ALL peoples
- Integrity of Creation: Environmental protection that is based on sound ecological principles

As a first step in carrying out their responsibility to the greater community of life, they designed a self-assessment tool to help them develop a greater awareness and respect for sustainable living. This "Earth-Friendly Audit," as it was named, was intended to help them determine how well they measure up to an eco-friendly style of living and way of working in and managing their facilities. In addition to helping the sisters assess their "earth-friendly" habits in operating their homes, they envisioned a broader circle of influence for the audit, extending to their various work environments, SSSF-owned buildings and SSSF-sponsored institutions. Thus, the three editions of the audit were created: Building Audit, Office Audit for the work environment, and Home Audit.

A set of criteria was formulated for each edition to help assess compliance with the standards for environmental protection in the following areas:

- Energy conservation, efficiency and alternatives
- Water conservation and wastewater management
- Air quality preservation
- Natural environment preservation
- Organic and locally grown food production
- Plant and animal protection
- Building renovation and new building construction

Conducting the Earth-Friendly Audit

Building Audit

A pilot run of the audit was planned for the St. Joseph Campus at 1501 (St. Joseph Center) and 1515 (Sacred Heart Center) on South Layton Boulevard, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A procedure for distributing the building audit questionnaire was planned with the management of St. Joseph Center (motherhouse), Sacred Heart Center (adjoining building), and grounds maintenance (garden and parking lot). After reviewing the results of the audit with the building managers, recommendations were made for improving the audit questionnaire and procedures for implementation. The building audit was then conducted in a similar way at St. Joseph Convent, a retirement home for the sisters in Campbellsport, Wisconsin.

Office Audit

Following the building audit, a questionnaire for the work environment was offered to the various departments in the SSSF buildings: U.S. Provincial offices, International offices, and Development offices. A plan for distribution of the office audit questionnaire was formulated with the department directors. The results were tallied and a presentation of the results was made in a joint meeting of the combined office staff. Recommendations were offered and prioritized to assure a more concerted effort toward specific priority goals over a six-month period. These goals for the various departments were: to economize on lighting, to conserve paper, and to continue educational efforts toward sensitizing personnel for continual "green" practices improvement.

Home Audit

Finally, an adaptation of the questionnaire was completed for all the sisters and associates living in the United States, to help them assess how well their lifestyles comply with earth-friendly practices. Again, the results were tallied and recommendations for further community efforts were made by the sisters to the provincial leadership team. Results and recommendations were shared with the entire community via the SSSF sisters/associates web site. Examples of individual goals for sustainable living were to:

- Conserve energy (use compact fluorescent light bulbs, control temperature)
- Minimize use of paper; rely more on electronic communication
- Eliminate use of bottled water
- Avoid use of styrofoam/paper/plastic plates, cups, flatware, etc.
- Increase efforts to reduce, recycle and reuse resources
- Increase use of green, living plants in offices and homes

It is important to recognize that very few institutions, if any, embody all the dimensions of sustainability. It is our hope that this audit will help all those who use it to become better informed about what they have already accomplished and how they might take further action to improve their efforts in the future.

Impact of the Earth-Friendly Audit

A "Green Committee" was established to assure ongoing follow-up of the building audit of St. Joseph Campus and to implement recommendations made for improving earth-friendly standards at St. Joseph Campus. As a start, the Green Committee invited Ann Beier of the Milwaukee Office of Environmental Sustainability to inform Campus staff members of the kinds of eco-friendly practices being implemented in the city of Milwaukee and to provide useful information for improving green practices throughout SSSF properties and in the homes of the employees. The Green Committee has addressed other issues such as:

- Using washable and reusable dishes and table service at all events sponsored by the School Sisters of St. Francis
- Using water filtering dispensers for drinking water in both buildings on campus
- Discontinuing the use of bottled water as well as paper and styrofoam cups and cartons through the campus
- Setting computer equipment to automatically go into standby mode when not in use
- Building a campus intranet system to help reduce paper use for announcements, permission forms, sign up procedures, etc.
- Installing an electronic employee clock system for sign-in/check-out procedures, as well as procedures related to tracking employee wages and benefits
- Replacing of larger and smaller equipment and appliances with more efficient models, including light bulbs
- Turning off unnecessary strings of lights and encouraging staff to turn off lights when leaving the office for half an hour or more at a time
- Reviewing recycling procedures to clarify what should be sent to the shredder or to the recycling bins, and what should be sent to information services for other uses
- Setting up procedures for recycling batteries and light bulbs

As a follow-up to the Earth-Friendly Home Audit, a "C.A.R.E." (Creating Actions to Reverence the Earth) Committee sends a monthly e-mail to the sisters and associates to keep them updated on issues about the environment and to suggest recommendations for action. In addition, the sisters have testified to their commitment for living a more earth-friendly lifestyle through such statements as:

- "I no longer let the water faucet run while brushing my teeth."
- "I need to get in the habit of reading labels more carefully regarding hazardous chemicals, and use environmentally-safe cleaning products such as vinegar and baking soda, for keeping the sink drains cleared of debris."
- "We have purchased fabric shopping bags to carry our groceries each week."
- "I have begun to carry filtered drinking water in reusable glass bottles rather than purchase plastic bottled water."
- "We try to minimize our driving by planning several stops in one commute rather than making individual trips to church, the store, the library, the bank, the post office, etc."
- "Once we use up all our paper napkins, we will be using cloth napkins instead."

Together, in hope, the School Sisters of St. Francis have begun a concerted effort toward a consistent sustainable way of life by which the conduct of all individuals, institutions, and governing bodies of the SSSF hold themselves accountable to future generations. If the experience of the SSSF can be replicated by other groups and individuals for the good of our planet, an unending chain of local, national and global partnerships to care for the Earth and one another will know no end.