

Going Green

Making Our Home Earth Friendly

By Sarah Baker

Motherhouse Administrator Sister Marion Renkens shares the ways the sisters implement ecologically-sound practices at the motherhouse.

What were the first steps you took to go “green” when you came on as the house administrator in 2000?

The first thing I changed was the stacks of paper napkins at the buffet line. Most people would take three at a time. Instead, we put one napkin at every place setting, which helped eliminate some of the waste. For the dining room ambiance, place mats were only used for special occasions. I think every day is special, so I started purchasing 100 percent recycled paper place mats to put on the tables every day.

Another thing I changed was the use of paper plates at every celebration. When I first saw the staff haul out the paper plates for dining, I thought, “What is this? What is wrong with our dishes?!” So, we switched from paper plates to china for special events and celebratory dinners.

Where do your ideas come from?

Many of my ideas come from the suggestions of others, particularly the housekeeping and maintenance staff. A couple of years ago, I showed the staff a video called “*The Story of Stuff*,” on rampant consumerism and its adverse effects on our environment and on us. Afterwards, they broke up into



Sister Marion Renkens, CSJ, motherhouse administrator

small groups and reported back with project ideas such as employees bringing their own cloth napkin to lunch, a worm farm to feed food scraps to, and automatic hand towel dispensers in the restrooms.

I also get the staff involved when we have decisions to make about buying products. I ask them to try the products and then we compare. We look at vendors with similar cleaning products, what cleans the best, and what is least toxic—sometimes the product may be earth friendly but not people friendly. I work with the staff in helping them make choices for us.

Were these new initiatives successful?

Yes, even if the end result wasn't what we anticipated. The automated hand towel dispensers in the high-traffic restrooms have saved a lot on our waste of paper. Most people only use the one sheet given at a time. The worm farm was not successful as the worms would not train properly. Instead, we give our produce scraps to Sister Sandra Schmid who feeds them to the chickens at the community garden on Michigan Avenue. What the chickens don't use goes into the compost pile. With the napkin project, not everyone would remember to bring their own napkin. So the dining room staff decided to provide the cloth napkins for employees and guests.

What other unique ways does the house stay “green?”

We use expired mayonnaise on our dining room tables to make them shine. You rub it on with your hands and then take a cloth to rub it off and polish it. It's not just for sandwiches! To clean windows, housekeeping uses vinegar and water to wash them and newspaper to dry them. Newspaper is always readily available.



Top 15 Ways the Motherhouse Stays

GREEN

1. **Recycling** of containers, paper, cardboard, household batteries
2. Use of **paper or corn based** disposable containers (if needed)
3. Use of **eco-friendly cleaning products** & laundry soap and reuse the product bottles.
4. Use of **low-flow** shower heads and water-saving toilets
5. Toilet tissue, facial tissue and guest room note pads are made from **recycled products**
6. Use of **CFL bulbs**
7. Use of **cloth napkins** by motherhouse residents, staff and guests for meals
8. **Turn off** the heating units in rooms that are not occupied
9. Use **locally-grown** seasonal foods
10. **Reuse water** from the dehumidifiers to water plants
11. Serve **produce scraps** from kitchen to chickens at the Michigan Avenue garden
12. Installment of **water sensors** for automatic sprinklers
13. Use of **Roman pavers** in the courtyards allowing the water to soak between bricks, leaving no puddles and helping with safety
14. Use of **automated hand towel dispensers**
15. Overnight guests are asked to **reuse towels** if possible



You use one sheet to dry and another to make it shine.

We save the water from dehumidifiers and use it to water the plants. For our landscaping, we have pavers (bricks) for our sidewalks. The space between them allows for the water to run off and soak into the earth, leaving no puddles and helping with safety. And, our automatic sprinkler system has water sensors. Water will turn on only when the sensor says the earth is dry, rather than being on an automatic timer.

We are switching to foam soap in the restrooms. Less soap is consumed when it is foam, therefore, saving us money on buying less product.

Do you have a specific goal for the future?

No, I never have a goal; it's an inspiration, a different mindset. How do we celebrate and keep the earth in mind? How do we stop filling landfills?

A heightened awareness of our interaction between nature and humans is always before our eyes daily and the Sisters of St. Joseph recognize the urgency to act. We are challenged to restore Earth's healthy living systems and to become strong leaders for systemic change that will allow all to live in right relationship with Earth. ✨

Cindy Demma of the motherhouse housekeeping crew sorts through the papers in the recycling area. "We recycle everything in this place!" she says.