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Institutional Stewardship and Ecology

Arlan Nederhoff

Dordt College, arlan.nederhoff@dordt.edu

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Institutional Stewardship and Ecology

Abstract

"We are not to exploit, waste, or abuse the resources of God's world, but care for them and use them to serve God and humankind."

Posting about becoming environmentally conscientious from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/institutional-stewardship-and-ecology/>

Keywords

In All Things, creation, Dordt College, Christian stewardship, ecology

Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Institutional Stewardship and Ecology

 inallthings.org/institutional-stewardship-and-ecology/

Arlan Nederhoff

The book of Genesis starts with the creation story and the declaration that God saw everything that he had made and it was very good. After creating man and woman, “God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” Genesis 1:28 is commonly referred to as the cultural mandate or the creation mandate. We are God’s representatives in this fallen world, stewards of God’s creation.

To me, one key to living in obedience with the creation mandate is the concept of stewardship. When I look up steward in my dictionary, the first definition listed talks about one who manages another’s property, finances, or other affairs. In Matthew 24 and 25, Jesus tells the story of a man who trusts his servants with his possessions before taking a trip. When the man returns, two of his servants are commended for investing wisely and are given more responsibility. The third is punished for using the resources unwisely by burying them in the ground. We are not to exploit, waste, or abuse the resources of God’s world, but care for them and use them to serve God and humankind. While the effects of sin will never allow us to perfectly obey the creation mandate, how can we become more obedient to the creation mandate, and what does living in accordance with the creation mandate mean, not just individually but institutionally? How can an institution be a good steward? Institutions regularly make decisions that have significant cost and environmental implications, such as determining the type of heating and cooling system to use in a new or remodeled building. Institutions can also encourage students, customers, and employees to change some daily practices.

None of these decisions can be made in a vacuum. Being a good steward involves trying to use well the various gifts and ‘properties’ we have been given by our Creator, be they monetary, ecological, geographical, or otherwise. Balancing the best use of these various elements is not easy. For example, when my institution, Dordt College, opened the Kuyper Apartments in the fall of 2010, we wanted to be both environmentally conscientious and fiscally responsible when planning for the project. We asked the designing engineers we were working with about the feasibility of installing a geo-thermal heating and cooling system in the building. A geo-thermal system reduces the amount of fossil fuels needed to heat and cool a building by using the earth’s constant temperature to help heat and cool the building. A calculation known as a payback analysis was performed by the engineers. This calculation determines the period of time needed to recover the higher initial installation cost incurred by using a geo-thermal system by the lower annual operating cost of the geo-thermal system. The calculation projected a breakeven point in 5 to 7 years. Dordt proceeded with the installation of the geo-thermal system based on the relatively short payback needed to recoup the initial cost.

However, when Dordt began construction on a new Science Building in 2013 and asked the engineer to again consider using a geo-thermal system to heat and cool this building, the calculation yielded a much different result. Energy prices had dropped since the construction of Kuyper Apartments and therefore the payback calculation indicated that the higher installation cost of a geo-thermal system could not be offset by the lower annual operating cost of the system. Instead, the engineer proposed the use of an ice storage system, which uses a chiller to make ice during the night. The ice is then used to cool the building the next day instead of operating the chiller. An ice storage system saves money and is environmentally friendly in two ways. First, the size of the chiller needed to cool the building is smaller since the ice is used to cool

during the hottest part of the day, thereby saving initial manufacturing and installation costs. Second, by shifting the peak load, the college saves utility cost and the utility company delays construction of a new power plant, thereby reducing the environmental impact of the utility company. In both of these instances, we sought a balance between being environmentally conscientious and being fiscally responsible.

However, the changes an institution can make to be more ecologically sensitive are not confined to major building projects. Implementation of tray-less dining on Dordt's campus this fall didn't require engineers to evaluate systems or make payback calculations. The only thing that had to change in order to implement tray-less dining was human behavior. Sometimes this change can be much more difficult to make. I'm happy to say that students returned for the fall semester and adapted to the change without an issue, and our local environment is now enjoying the benefits of tray-less dining: reduced food waste, reduced water usage, and lower energy usage.

What are steps that you can take, in your personal life and in the life of the institutions of which you are a part (e.g., your workplace, your church, etc.), to be environmentally conscientious? Some changes may be large and require time to evaluate options, but others (like taking less food so there's less to throw away) may only require a change in your daily routine. Please share what you've done in the comments below, so that others can learn about creative ways that we can all be better stewards of, benefit, and glorify God's creation.