

Bethel College Mennonite Church Creation Care Committee
Creation Stewardship Notes # 26, December 2007
BEING A STEWARD FOR GREEN
Chris Kliewer

“Stewardship” is a word that seems to carry a certain religious connotation with it, and I find myself reserving it for conversations with people that share similar values and beliefs to my own. In my profession as an architect, the word “stewardship” just isn’t used to describe the importance of building in an environmentally friendly way, but words like “green” and “sustainable” are thrown around more and more as consumers realize that they can save on utility costs and market themselves more effectively by being green. For me, the distinction between “being green” and being a steward of the earth is an important difference to recognize, and it’s only been in the last couple of years that I’ve reached that realization for myself, and what it means to my career, as well as my personal beliefs.

Sustainable design has been around ever since humans started building shelters, and the exciting part of green building for me is that, in some ways, we have come full circle in terms of our recognition of individual environments and the resources that those regions offer. Although we have caused much damage to the environment because of our mechanical advancements since the industrial revolution, the knowledge that was gained through the process afforded us new technologies that are now being used to highlight green design and respond to the renewable resources that we have available. This is where I make the distinction between green design at large and personal stewardship and responsibility. God has given us sources of energy and resources for building that can be harnessed and utilized in such a way that create very few, if any, ill effects on the environment. Doing our part as humans to recognize these opportunities and take advantage of them has a certain benefit, but taking on this responsibility as Christians in an effort to preserve and respect the earth that God has given us carries with it a personal responsibility that we can witness to the rest of the population and has less to do with our personal gain and everything to do with our mission as believers.

I didn’t grow up thinking about things like recycling, energy efficiency and renewable resources, and even when some of those concepts started filtering into my consciousness during my time at Bethel, they weren’t a priority to me. It wasn’t until my graduate work in architecture began that I realized there were alternative ways of building, much less living, but I still had to get my arms around where we had come from before I could respond to the growing demands of going green. Even after graduating in 2000, I found myself adjusting to the differences between designing in a studio and working in an office to build real buildings; but, once I felt comfortable with the transition, I found myself pulling ideas that were developed in school and making them work in built projects. The project that best exemplified this was the straw bale house that I worked on for Jon and Alissa Cyphers here in Wichita. Alissa (Randa) was a student at Bethel during my time there, and making the connection between my career as an architect and the Bethel community was not only exciting to me, it caused me to start thinking about how the two sets of education I received might compliment each other. Of course, the education I received at Bethel was much more subjective when compared to my architectural education, and I began thinking about how the concepts and principles I learned by living at Bethel could apply to working as an architect.

It wasn’t long after this that God provided an answer. Up until that point, my work as an architect had remained completely separate from my upbringing and the experience that was so meaningful to me at Bethel. It occurred to me that green design was not a fad, and that it would behoove me to educate myself on sustainability in order to become more successful from a business perspective, but when I realized that this approach was directly inline with my beliefs

as a Christian, the pieces that had remained separate entities, to that point, began to fall into place. It was exciting to think that the vocation I had chosen suddenly had new meaning and that the beliefs I talked about on Sunday mornings could be a driving force in the work I do every day. I started regular conversations with people that I considered to be green mentors and began researching sustainable concepts, both architectural and social. After receiving my license as a registered architect last December, I decided to pursue accreditation under the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rating system.

Enter Greensburg. I've described my involvement with "making Greensburg green" in the July 2007 issue of Bethel College's *Context* publication, and as I point out in that perspective article, my wife is credited with throwing out the idea of green building in Greensburg. I initially thought that this small community would be opposed, and maybe even insulted by the idea of an outsider suggesting that they "go green", but then I was reminded of the fact that I grew up in a small, rural Kansas town, not unlike Greensburg, and it was the values I developed growing up in that community that I was now calling on to give my career a new sense of purpose. What I found was that the Greensburg residents were excited about the opportunity and had begun to discuss the broad concept of being a model green city before I even got involved. What they needed help with were specifics and the contacts that would make the concept a reality. Because of the national publicity that this idea received and the fact that my name was associated with it, I quickly realized that I needed to be the person that directed all of the energy and interest towards the people of Greensburg. Fortunately, a local non-profit organization called Greensburg Greentown was quickly developed that became a clearinghouse for all of the product representatives, builders and sponsors that wanted to help. All of my work in Greensburg has been done on a volunteer basis, and after donating a considerable amount of my time over the summer months, it quickly became apparent that I needed to focus my efforts more efficiently, which is why I now act as the commercial architect representative for Greensburg Greentown's advisory board. Their work and proximity to the town has been critical in providing answers and ongoing support for the residents' desire to be stewards for their community.

There I go, using the word "steward" again. The distinction I make between being green and being a steward of the earth will become even more magnified as business owners are driven to make green decisions to "keep up", but as society begins to take on sustainability as a personal responsibility, it is important for us as Christians to remember that God gave us the Sun, God gave us wind, God gave us renewable resources and He gave us minds to develop smarter ways of doing things without depleting the earth or taking opportunities away from future generations. The concepts of green and stewardship are not mutually exclusive, but the motivations behind them very often are. I hope that the work I've chosen to pursue will encourage others to be stewards, long after the concept of being green has lost its luster and become mainstream. I believe that God gives each one of us opportunities to display our beliefs and be a witness to Him through the gifts and talents that He bestows upon us and the careers we choose to pursue. Recognizing those opportunities and acting on them can provide us a venue for doing God's work while we are "at work" and begin to blur the distinction between the two.