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# GESU GREEN TEAM'S VISIT TO IHM MOTHERHOUSE

## 1. INTRO

On Saturday, 13 May 2017, nine members from Gesu traveled to Monroe, MI to visit the IHM Motherhouse. The purpose of the trip was to learn about the sisters' efforts toward sustainable living, including the LEED certification of their motherhouse. **This document is meant to provide a summary of insights gained from the trip.**

## 2. CONTEXT

### A. Motherhouse Construction

- i. **Early 1930's:** Sr. Sue Sattler and Sr. Angela Hibbard provided us with background information about the Motherhouse. The building was originally constructed in 1932, during the Great Depression, and was the largest private construction project in the country at the time. Because the sisters' school burned down because of heat accumulating in the walls, the new building was, as Sr. Sue put it: "built to solve the last problem." Thus, the new house was constructed with incredibly thick brick walls to withstand any future fires. Sr. Sue told us that the walls were so thick that contractors in 2000 said they had never seen walls that thick!
- ii. **Mid-1990's:** Flash forward 60 years and the Motherhouse **needed updating** on a grand scale. All the systems, e.g., plumbing, electric, heating and cooling, etc., were outdated. In addition to infrastructure needs, the sisters were also aware of the needs of their aging population. Changes to the Motherhouse would need to **accommodate an older, smaller demographic, so health care and retirement amenities were a high priority.**

1. At this crossroads, the sisters were faced with multiple paths to choose from and had to ask themselves: Should we *tear down the building and rebuild on the same site*? Should we *sell and move elsewhere*? Should we, could we *gut the existing building and renovate it*?
2. To tackle these questions and to move forward, the sisters decided to form research groups. After learning about their options, the sisters decided that they wanted to move forward by **renovating their home in a way that fit with their order's values and with the vision and understanding that Creation is at risk.**
3. **1999:** The various research groups met in the summer of 1999. Sr. Angela described the Holy Spirit bringing everyone together in a powerful way, and their direction was revealed and clear to them. Because the IHM sisters live in a community of “volunteer socialism,” a vote was put to the community and efforts to move forward in creating a more **environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable** way began. In moving forward, the sisters were very careful about **who** they chose work with and **how** plans were operationalized.
4. **2003:** Since moving into their newly renovated home in 2003, the sisters have hosted over 13,000 visitors on tours. These tours and visits help to **educate the public** on sustainable living and green infrastructure. The IHM sisters have a long tradition of education excellence. Therefore, the idea of their home being a “**living laboratory**” was a key factor during construction and continues today. Also since 2003, the sisters have provided **operational data** (e.g., water and energy usage) to **Christman Co.**, the construction company responsible for the renovations. More about the congregation's relationship with Christman can be found on page 5 of this document. Christman features the Motherhouse on their website at:

<https://www.christmanco.com/Portfolio/MotherhouseRenovation>

## B. Video: “Blue Nuns Go Green”

- i. Following the above introductory information, Sr. Sue showed us a video (~22 minutes runtime) titled “Blue Nuns Go Green.” The video is available on **YouTube** via the IHM sisters’ channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fILpcLPhUU>

Additionally, a **slideshow/downloadable pdf** version of the video can be accessed via a Notre Dame website:

[https://green.nd.edu/assets/17938/charlesmorris\\_danielleconroyd\\_2small.pdf](https://green.nd.edu/assets/17938/charlesmorris_danielleconroyd_2small.pdf)

- ii. One of the title scenes in the video summarizes the sisters’ intent toward updating their home: “**The Vision: A Moral Mandate.**” When deciding what to do with their home, the sisters asked themselves a series of questions. One such question was, what **legacy** did they want to leave for future generations? They decided to renovate the Motherhouse to be a “**restorative presence on Earth**” rather than a destructive one. Throughout the renovation process, the sisters were guided by a vision of moral obligation and chose to “practice humility” in their construction and lifestyle options.
- iii. Construction and development projects in the United States produce over 130 million tons of waste every year. Therefore, the “**3 R’s**” were important to the sisters during the Motherhouse renovation. Some examples can be found below. Please see the video or pdf (links above) for exact numbers.
  - **Reduce:** Through sustainable architecture and green practices, the sisters have been able to reduce their ecological footprint.
  - **Reuse:** Wooden doors, windows, furniture, marble, and lighting fixtures were used and retrofitted to meet higher efficiency standards.
  - **Recycle:** Carpet flooring was and is recycled through a company in Ann Arbor.
- iv. Per standards set forth by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), the IHM Motherhouse is **LEED certified**. Information about LEED certification can be found at USGBC’s website:

<http://www.usgbc.org/>

- v. A list of **sustainable/green design features** at the Motherhouse are below:
- **Lawns converted to meadow**, using native flora, have reduced maintenance costs and ecological impacts associated with conventional lawn care practices.
  - Usage of **low VOC paints** improves indoor air quality.
  - **Low-flow toilet fixtures** reduce water usage.
  - A **constructed wetland** is part of the building's **graywater system**. The wetland naturally treats the water flushed from sinks and showers (not toilets!) and sends the filtered water back into the building to be used as toilet water. This “graywater” is actually dyed blue so that residents and staff can visually recognize the water—although the water is clean enough for toilet water, you wouldn't want to drink it! A **lifecycle analysis** was conducted on the graywater system and the results show that the initial cost was **paid off in benefits less than 6 years** after installation.
  - Using the Earth as a large radiator, the Motherhouse is heated and cooled through a **closed-loop geothermal system**.
  - “Green” products, such as **bamboo** and **cork**, are used for flooring and fixtures throughout the building. These products are considered green because they grow at a naturally fast pace, are biodegradable, and are relatively sturdy/long-lasting.
  - There is a **windmill** on the campus to assist with the flow of the water recycling wetland. It was necessary because the sisters had long habits of conserving water, and they didn't use enough in the tubs and sinks to move through the constructed wetland.
- vi. In addition to their sustainable infrastructure, the sisters also are engaged in a variety of **outreach efforts and projects**. Some of those efforts are listed below:
- Having a **deep sense of place** in the context of their **community**, their **watershed**, and the **Great Lakes bioregion**, the IHM sisters founded the **River Raisin Institute** in 2003. You can read about the institute and can find upcoming events at its website:

<http://rriearth.org/>

- Participating in the **Religious Coalition for the Great Lakes:**  
<https://ssjrochester.org/filehandler.ashx?x=4211>
- Being a membership congregation of **Michigan Interfaith Power & Light:**  
<http://www.miipl.org/about/>
- Internally, the sisters have a **Campus Greening Committee** to continue and enrich their commitment to sustainable living.

### 3. LESSONS LEARNED

#### A. Relationship with Christman Co.

- i. One of the best things about the renovation process, in the opinions of Sr. Sue and Sr. Angela, was the reflexive **transformation** that occurred between the congregation and the construction company. As the sisters fulfilled their goal to “**move gently and cause less harm**” through renovating their home, members of their congregation of course gained many insights about sustainable/green design. They never expected that members of the construction company would learn something from them.
- ii. Since working with the IHM sisters on the renovation of the Motherhouse campus in Monroe, Christman now **mandates recycling** as part of every project they do.

#### B. Moving into the Future

- i. About 100 sisters currently reside at the Motherhouse and their **median age is 86** years old. A key component of the campus’s renovation during the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was that construction allowed for **adaptive renovations** in the future. With an aging population and with financial considerations, those adaptive renovations are currently being discussed to meet both current and future needs.
- ii. Presently, the Motherhouse offers independent and assisted living options. Nursing home beds are available for both the sisters and the public. The congregation is currently in the process of certifying their Memory Care ward as a Home for the Aged with the state of Michigan.

- iii. Finally, sisters have three options when it comes to burial choices. You can choose traditional embalming, cremation, or a green burial. It is also possible to donate your body to a medical teaching facility and be buried in the sisters' cemetery later.

Anyone who would like to see the IHM Motherhouse and grounds can schedule a tour with Sharon Venier, Staff Assistant to the Sustainability Office, by calling **(734)-240-9750** or emailing **[svenier@ihmsisters.org](mailto:svenier@ihmsisters.org)**

These notes were written by a member of Gesu parish. If you wish to read a brief summary of the renovation process provided by the sisters, please visit their website:  
<https://ihmsisters.org/living-justly/sustainable-community/motherhouse-campus/>