

CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME: GESU CHURCH AND SCHOOL UNITE TO HELP OUR ENVIRONMENT



"There is a growing sensitivity to the environment and the need to protect nature, along with a growing concern, both genuine and distressing, for what is happening to our planet..."

"What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?"

-Pope Francis, Laudato Si, Papal Encyclical

GESU GOES GREEN

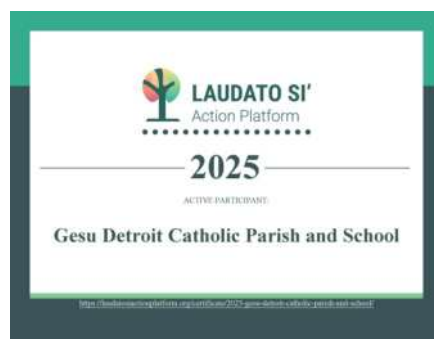
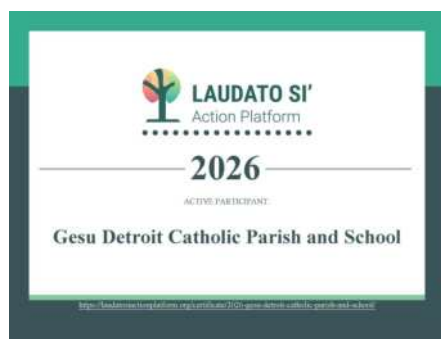
Since 2015, Gesu Church and School, located on an urban campus in Northwest Detroit, have strived to improve the environment. This started with small groups of parishioners gathering to read and discuss Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*, which is a letter addressed to "every person living on this planet" calling for global dialogue on how we are shaping the future of our planet Earth through our daily actions and decisions.

After completing group study of *Laudato Si*, Gesu parishioners stated that they wanted to do more, and the **Gesu Green Team** was created.

The Gesu Green Team asked Gesu School to join the effort. Both the school and parish have continued to make small and large improvements to Gesu's more than 100-year-old campus through sustainability measures and the development of a conscious mindset to care for our common home. In 2023, Gesu began the process to be designated as a Laudato Si Parish. Gesu has completed two of the five years needed to receive the Laudato Si designation.

The following pages document some of the projects that Gesu has undertaken, illustrating successes and challenges in a constantly evolving process. We hope Gesu's ongoing "green" journey inspires you to also participate in the worldwide effort of Caring for our Common Home.

We are very proud that Gesu is now recognized as a Laudato Si participant for 2025 and 2026 as well as a National Wildlife Federation Habitat and Eco-School, a Wayne County Green School, a State of Michigan 2025-2026 and 2024-2025 Evergreen School, and a 2023-2024 Green School.



GESU SCHOOL RECYCLING

Since 2023, Gesu students go to each classroom and office in the school to collect paper and plastic that has been recycled during the week. The students check each bin for contamination and weigh how much is recycled. The recycling is then placed in the recycle container which is located in the school parking lot. The recycling is picked up weekly by an outside company.



Students made bins for recycling from existing trash containers in the classroom



Cardboard lids were added to let students know what can be recycled



Each bin is weighed to keep track of the amount of recycling



All recycling is removed from the building weekly.

REDUCING CAFETERIA GARBAGE

In 2023, Gesu School was generating 15 large garbage bags of daily waste from its cafeteria. Gesu students learned that too much uneaten food was going to landfills. Gesu staff worked with the students to reduce this waste by sorting it. Once sorted, this program saves Gesu over \$1400 per year in the cost of garbage bags alone! Under this program, these are the steps Gesu students follow to consolidate and reduce their cafeteria waste:

- If a food item is not eaten and still in original packaging, it is placed in a “share” box for other students to eat.
- If any liquid remains in a beverage container, the liquid is poured into a 5-gallon bucket and used to fertilize trees on Gesu’s campus. The beverage container is then recycled or discarded.
- All food waste is deposited into two buckets—one bucket is composted in an Earthcube compost bin located on site, and the other bucket is taken to an urban farm to feed the animals.
- A fourth bucket is used to collect recyclable food containers.
- All remaining garbage now fits into one or two trash bags, after the lunch trays are stacked and discarded.



Before reduction, 15 bags of trash were removed daily.



Share table/bin



Pouring liquid into liquid bucket



Food for the farm or composting.



Bin for recyclables



Stacking the lunch trays to conserve space in the trash bags

COMPOSTING FOOD WASTE

In October 2023, Gesu School began composting its food waste in a composter although it soon ran out of room. We then connected with Pingree Farms, an urban farm located three miles from Gesu School. They agreed to take all of our non-meat food waste to feed their animals. A volunteer then built a new sorting table which has 4 buckets:

1. Liquids get emptied into one bucket and is used to fertilize trees on Gesu's campus.
2. Non-meat food waste goes into a bucket that goes to the farm to feed the animals.
3. Meat products go into a bucket which gets sealed, placed near the composting machine by students. School staff then mix the meat waste into the compost machine and it eventually turns into compost.
4. The last bucket receives recyclable containers from student lunches. These are rinsed quickly in the kitchen and placed in our recycle bin for pick up.



Sorting table built by a volun-



Buckets ready to go to
Pingree Farm



Goats waiting to be fed at Pingree Farm

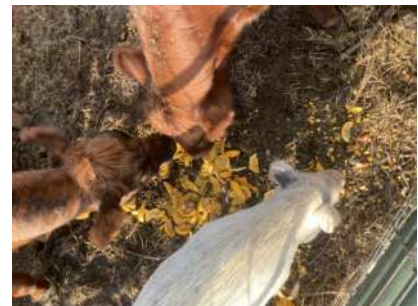


Students taking meat to the
composter

**Gesu has kept over 63,000
lbs. of waste from the landfill.**



Earth Cube composter



Cows and pigs eating food waste



Items to be recycled

REPLACING POLYSTYRENE AND PLASTICS

Although Gesu students greatly reduced their waste by sorting cafeteria garbage and stacking trays, the polystyrene food trays and plastic sporks were still being thrown away and sent to the landfill. Polystyrene is part of a “forever” chemical family which never breaks down and becomes harmful when heated. Gesu decided to replace all polystyrene trays with reusable metal trays. By May 2024, the students started eating from metal trays and using metal sporks instead of plastic ones. Gesu staff washes the metal trays and sporks daily. Thanks to these efforts, Gesu students are no longer exposed to these chemicals at school, and no “forever” chemicals from polystyrene trays are sent to landfills. This has reduced our garbage even further.



Sporks, straws and trays headed to the landfill



Student lunches served on new trays



Gesu staff cleaning lunch trays



Sporks instead of plastic cutlery



All lunch garbage is now reduced to a small trash can

REFILLABLE WATER BOTTLE STATIONS

Gesu School has installed seven water bottle filling stations so that students, staff, and guests in the school refill their reusable water bottles rather than drinking from plastic, single-use disposable bottles. The Gesu Science Club educates all students on the benefits of reusing water bottles instead of disposable ones.



Water bottle refill stations at Gesu



Student fills a water bottle



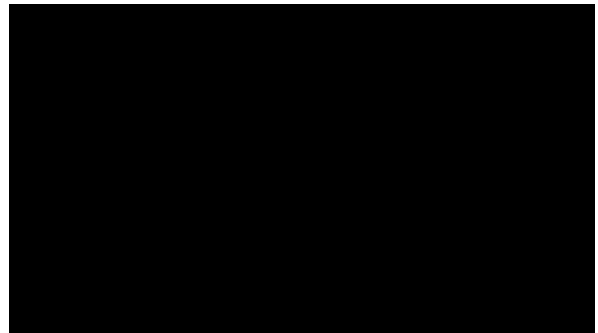
The counter educates students about not using disposable bottles



Water bottle being refilled in the school

SOLAR ENERGY

In 2018, the "My Solar School Contest" was held by the Ecology Center in Ann Arbor. Gesu staff and students formed the Solar Club to compete (now called the Science Club), and the group of 11 students toured solar facilities, spoke to experts, and researched the impact of fossil fuels. One benefit of solar energy that really stuck with them was it helps reduce air pollution, a primary cause of asthma. Because 21% of Michigan citizens, 27% of Detroiters, and 40% of the Gesu School Solar Club were living with asthma, getting solar energy at Gesu became a top priority. With the help of a Gesu alumna, the club created a video which they entered in the "My Solar School Contest." The club's video won third place, and Gesu was awarded a \$500 prize in a State of Michigan Earth Day event. The students then showed the Vice Presidents of UAW-Ford National Programs Center their video at a school assembly and asked if UAW-Ford could provide funding for solar panels for the school. UAW-Ford agreed to fund the project. The Ecology Center then awarded Gesu an additional \$5,000 through its Solar Matching Grant Program, and Michigan Inter-faith Power & Light added a grant through their Solar Faithful Grant Program. With this funding, Gesu installed a 24-kW solar system on the gym roof in 2018, reducing its emissions by an annual average of 21 tons of CO₂. The panels produce 17% of Gesu's energy use during the school year and completely powers both the school and church during the summer.



Gesu's solar array on the gymnasium roof



Members of the solar club on Gesu's gym roof

CLEANING SOLAR PANELS

In the summer of 2023, Gesu Green Team connected with Michigan State University to conduct a campus-wide energy audit. It was determined that Gesu's solar panels could be generating even more power, so Gesu students jumped into action and learned how to clean the panels in order to remove the black film that came from air pollution and slowed the solar transmission. The solar panels are now cleaned yearly by Gesu students.



Gesu Middle School students cleaning the solar panels so they operate efficiently

GPO SPONSORED ANNUAL USED UNIFORM SALE

Gesu students wear standard academic and gym uniforms. For the past 10 years, the Gesu Parent Organization has hosted used-uniform sales each August and December. Families donate clean, gently used uniforms, which are sold for \$5 per item. The program helps families reduce clothing costs while keeping usable garments out of landfills. At the August 2026 sale, more than 500 items were sold, diverting 200 pounds of clothing from the landfill. Non-branded items, such as navy pants, are also shared with other local schools, extending the program's environmental impact.



BIOSWALE CONSTRUCTION

In 2020, Gesu constructed two 6,023 cubic foot engineered pits called bioswales on its front lawn. The purpose of the bioswales are to divert gallons of rainwater that overwhelm the City of Detroit sewer system and infiltrate the Detroit River. The bioswales can retain 2,891 cubic feet of water and withstand a 100-year storm. These practices protect the Great Lakes watershed. As an added bonus, the bioswales also reduce Gesu's water bill by 10% per month.



Construction of the East bioswale



Volunteers planting native plants in the bioswales



Native plants growing in the bioswales

COURTYARD WATER MANAGEMENT

In 2019, Gesu set up five rain barrels in the school courtyard that can each hold 500 gallons of rain water collected from the roof. Like the bioswales, the rain barrels protect the Great Lakes watershed by diverting many gallons of wastewater that overwhelm the city sewers. Water from these barrels are used to water the plants in the courtyard, which is now being used as a “living” learning lab. These barrels also contribute to a 10% reduction in Gesu’s water bills.



Barrels were lifted into the courtyard by a crane



Collecting water from the roof through the downspouts

Hoses send water to the gardens

GREENING OF THE COURTYARD

After rain barrels were added to the courtyard to collect the water from the roof, volunteers removed 647 square feet of 10 inch thick concrete, all which had to be hand carried through the school to dumpsters. Gesu then built six large garden areas, and the students carried the soil through the building, bucket by bucket, to prepare the courtyard for planting. Gesu students were able to grow many types of plants, adding greenery to the courtyard.



Cleaning the courtyard before construction



Four dumpsters of concrete removed to create gardens



Above ground gardens constructed



Gardens filled with soil, bucket by bucket, and carried through the building into the courtyard

Flowers planted in newly constructed planters



PLANTING NATIVE GARDENS

In 2020, Gesu Green Team planted a native garden along the ramp leading into the church. Anytime you look, this area is alive with insects and pollinators, all healthy components of a garden. Pollinators are attracted to native plants, which make native plants crucial for a healthy environment. Then in 2024, a grant from the Xerces Foundation provided Gesu School with some native plants for its courtyard gardens. The Mercy High School soccer team volunteered to prepare the courtyard for a native garden to be planted. In time, this “living” science lab will allow Gesu students to study pollinators.



Green team members plant the native garden



Native garden along the church ramp



Mercy High School volunteers move compost and prepare the courtyard for a native garden

Gesu Courtyard
has now been
planted with
native plants



MAKING A RAIN GARDEN

Gesu's Green Team applied for a program with Friends of the Rouge to learn how to build a rain garden at Gesu. A Green Team volunteer was selected for the program, and she applied the knowledge she learned to analyze how rain is collected through downspouts and directed onto an area of Gesu's lawn rather than flow into the Detroit Sewer system. The Green Team planted native plants in this area because they can withstand the abundance of rain from the down spouts as well as drought conditions.



Raingarden in bloom



Signage to educate the community



New mulch placed in the rain garden

PLANTING A BEE LAWN

When water main repairs necessitated that the front lawn of the old rectory on Gesu's campus be torn up in the winter of 2024, it sparked a new step in Gesu's journey to becoming a Laudato Si Parish. Working with Gesu staff, the Green Team saw this as an opportunity to plant a pollinator-friendly bee lawn instead. Through cold and snowy days in March and April 2025, members of the Green Team began the challenging work of removing the remaining grass and breaking up the soil. Later, they planted it with a special seed mix developed by the University of Minnesota which combines a hardy fescue grass with white clover and thyme. The area was beautifully covered in plants that encourage pollination for most of the summer, until the lawn was mowed and soon after a long drought began. This killed the pollinator lawn.

However, a portion of the lawn was planned to be under construction in the spring of 2026 to add an ADA compliant ramp to the old rectory building. The ramp was installed, removing some of the lawn area. During the construction, much of the lawn was filled in by weeds that were challenging to keep up with. A solarizing process was the best way to kill all the weeds, their seeds, and prepare the lawn for replanting the pollinator mix. This entailed covering the entire lawn with plastic. Clear plastic was used where there was enough sunlight to cause the seeds to germinate and then warm enough to die. Black plastic was used in areas where plants grew but there was not enough sunlight to make it warm enough to kill them. The plastic will be removed in fall 2026 and the area will be planted with the pollinator seed mix. We now refer to this area as the "learning lawn."



Green Team members work to remove grass from



Much progress has been made providing a positive

ELIMINATING PESTICIDES

The encyclical, *Laudato Si*, calls us to care for all of creation; this is what the Gesu parish staff is working toward with its lawn care practices. It was determined that the use of some chemical solutions and fertilizers throughout campus by Gesu's lawn care provider was not aligned with our community obligations outlined in *Laudato Si* to protect all living things. Gesu identified alternative ways of maintaining its campus that are environmentally and human-safe, as well as cost-effective. Going forward, Gesu will be using these practices instead of using a traditional lawn care service:

- Using corn gluten meal, a natural byproduct of corn processing, to prevent weeds within traditional lawn areas. Corn gluten stops seeds from sprouting, provides nitrogen to the soil, and encourages the growth of the existing plants. Gesu applies it when the weed seeds are about to germinate, usually when the forsythia blooms in spring. The corn gluten meal becomes more effective over time. Corn gluten meal is fairly inexpensive and can be purchased locally.
- Using an iron-based herbicide to kill weeds that have already emerged.
- Manually removing weeds in sidewalk cracks and spraying them with a solution of horticultural vinegar, a naturally occurring substance, which is 20% acetic acid.



Gesu's lawns without pesticides



PARKING LOT IMPROVEMENTS

Gesu Parish is working to “green” its parking lots to prevent stormwater runoff from overwhelming the Detroit sewer system and infiltrating the Great Lakes watershed. The original plan was to remove portions of the asphalt and replace it with gardens. In the lot between the church and school, 10 inches of concrete was discovered below the asphalt, and Gesu did not have the funds to remove it all. Instead, some of the concrete was broken up so water could drain, and gardens were planted on top of the concrete in the areas near the church and school. This was not a permanent solution, but a stop gap measure until Gesu obtained the funds to fully renovate the parking lot.



Dirt placed over concrete



UDM students help prepare the area



UDJ student volunteers prepare the area for gardens



Canadian Anemone growing in parking lot



Native flowers in the parking lot

PARKING LOT RECONSTRUCTION

In 2022, Gesu received a generous donation to completely reconstruct all its campus parking lots with environmental considerations, remove an abandoned oil tank under the concrete, and waterproof the underground tunnel connecting the church and school. In August 2024, the project was completed and currently all water that falls onto the parking lots now drains into the bioswales or into underground storage instead of into the city catch basins connected to the sewer system. Native gardens fill in spaces occupied by the bioswales and the green area is more like a habitat rather than a parking lot.



Underground storage being prepared to detain water runoff



Curbing added to direct waterflow



Some of the parking lot landscaping



OIL TANK REMOVAL

In the early 20th century, Gesu heated its campus buildings with oil. In the 1960s, Gesu converted to natural gas and abandoned a 12,000 gallon oil tank in place under the parking lot with 9,500 gallons of #6 oil inside. Removing this tank has been a desire of Gesu staff for many years due to the potential biohazard, but the cost was prohibitive. During the reconstruction of the parking lot, this task was finally completed. The oil was heated and removed, the tank remained strong, and the soil beneath the tank was not contaminated.



The tank was located and the oil needed to be heated before it could be siphoned out of the tank into tanker trucks



An excavator lifts the tank out of the ground



Moving the oil tank was an onerous project



The tank was loaded onto a semi truck and hauled away

INSTALLING EV CHARGERS

To meet current and future needs in a transition from fossil fuels, Gesu has installed two Electric Vehicle charging stations in its newly renovated parking lot. Gesu parishioners charge their car while at Mass, staff use the chargers while at work, and the community uses the chargers after school hours. The EV chargers are available for use with a credit card and are not a financial burden for Gesu. Gesu makes money on each charge by receiving three times the cost of the energy used. There are two chargers per station, so four cars can be charged at the same time.



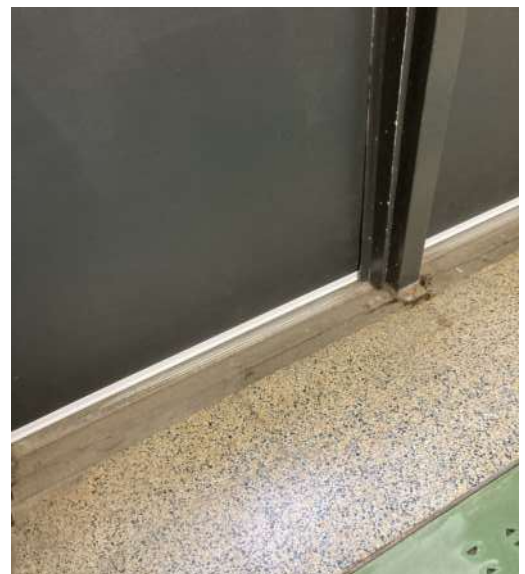
ENERGY AUDIT

In conjunction with Michigan State University, Gesu conducted a comprehensive energy audit across the entire 100-year-old Gesu campus in July 2023. The audit included four historic buildings: the church, school, parish center and rectory. The third-party assessment team, Michigan State University Industrial Assessment Center, provided a report of findings and suggested next steps that all have a 5-year (or less) return on investment. Some of these recommendations included:

- replacing light bulbs with LED-equivalents (every time a bulb burns out, Gesu upgrades it to LED);
- upgrading to programmable thermostats (completed in the buildings where applicable);
- installing weather-stripping in entranceways (completed at the church and in process at school);
- changing to a more cost-efficient natural gas supplier (done!);
- upgrading the heating system and adding automation (new boilers are needed and will be replaced in the future);
- recycling old heating equipment (will be completed when new boilers installed);
- conducting an annual cleaning/monitoring of existing rooftop solar panels (will happen yearly); and
- upgrading the church attic insulation (will happen when the roof is replaced).



A separate heating unit and programable thermostat controls the heat in the Gesu school social hall. This eliminates heating the entire building if only this room is in use.



New weather stripping at the bottom of doors keeps out cold air and rain water.

WINDOW REPLACEMENT

Gesu School was built in 1925 with nearly 600 windows. These windows were single-paned glass and without screens. In 2019-2020, thanks to a generous donation, Gesu School was able to replace 586 windows with double-paned glass with screens. The new windows are energy efficient, which means Gesu does not have to spend as much to heat its classrooms. This project has saved Gesu utility costs in addition to being the most environmentally-friendly choice.



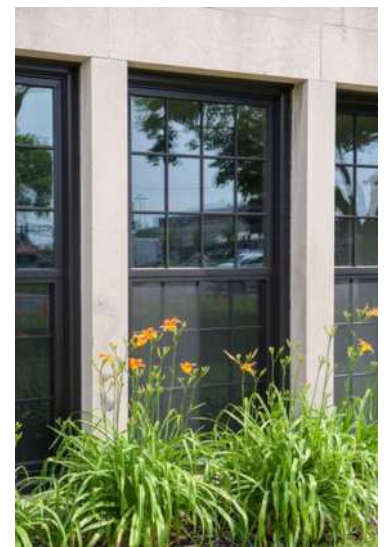
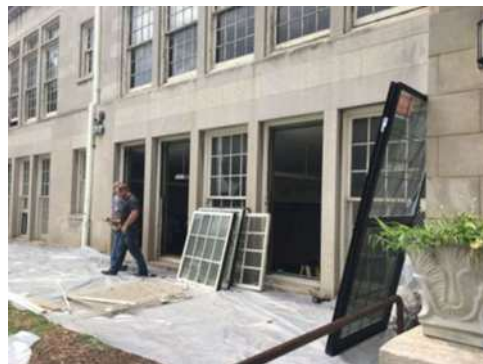
Original single paned windows



New windows in place!



Window replacement



REUSABLE SHOPPING BAGS

In 2018, the Gesu Green Team made and sold reusable fabric shopping bags for parishioners to reduce the use of single use plastic bags and raise funds for other projects. Upcycled fabric was gathered, and volunteers sewed the bags. There was a Green Team label put on all of the bags, and most are still in use today. Reusable bags are much more common now, but this was an early project to get people thinking about plastic bags and their harmful effect on the planet.



Display board educating parishioners on benefits of reusable bags



Green Team symbol



Customers appreciating their new bags!



Bags being sold

REMODELING TWO TEACHER LOUNGES

In October 2023, Gesu received a generous donation to remodel two 100-year-old teacher lounges. Both rooms now have running hot and cold water with facilities to warm up lunches and wash dishes. This matters because reusable dishes can now be used rather than plastic utensils and take-out containers. This has also facilitated reusing serving dishes and utensils versus disposable items for staff gatherings.



2nd Floor Lounge before renovation



2nd floor lounge after renovations



3rd Floor Lounge before renovations



3rd Floor Lounge after renovations

INSTALLING A DISHWASHER IN THE CHURCH

Coffee and donuts have been served after Sunday mass for years, and much trash was generated. The Gesu Green Team made reusable shopping bags in 2018 to raise funds for a dishwasher, but the plumbing obstacles were too great. In 2025, Gesu added a women's bathroom and was then able to install a dishwasher to wash mugs and reusable serving items. In time, we hope that each gathering will generate zero waste.



Hospitality serving area in Gesu Church



Area where dishwasher is installed



Newly installed dishwasher

CHURCH IMPROVEMENTS

Gesu Church was built in 1935 and does not have a dedicated heating or cooling system in the building. To heat the church, the boilers in the school create steam and send the steam through the tunnel under the parking lot to heating coils. The blowers in the church then distribute the heat when needed. There is no cooling system in the church beyond the same blowers used to move air around.

Gesu recently replaced the heating coils in the church so they now require less effort from the boilers to heat up. This saves energy and reduces wear and tear on the school boilers.

Gesu has also added a programable controller to the church blowers so that in the summer months they are set to operate at night and draw cool air into the church. Both of these recent improvements help the church to stay at a comfortable temperature in all seasons.

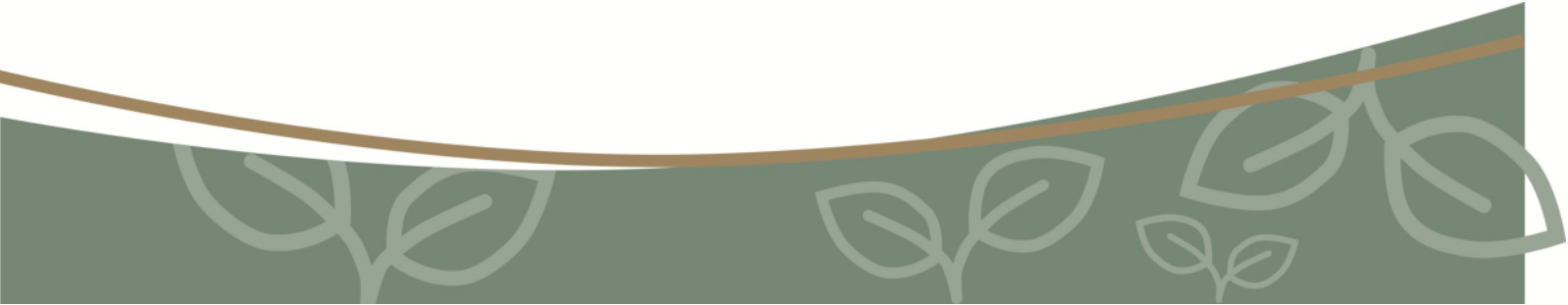


Gesu Catholic Church





ADDITIONAL SMALL PROJECTS AT GESU THAT MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

- Timers have been placed on the campus-wide Gesu computer system to turn off all computers when not in use
 - Gesu has replaced bathroom faucets with aerators
 - Gesu hosted a “teach-in” on water issues
 - Gesu annually coordinates its month-long celebration of the global ecumenical celebration “Season of Creation”
 - Hymnals were purchased that do not need yearly replacement
 - Washable linens are used for Parish hospitality
 - Energy Star Portfolio Manager was set up to cover all campus buildings
 - Campus environmental initiatives are shared via webinars and tours to both parishioners and the public.
- 

SPREADING THE WORD

Gesu understands the importance of letting others know what environmental strides have been made on its campus. The school Science Club actively shares information via presentations at conferences, tours and going to other schools to encourage others to join this movement. Gesu sends a weekly e-blast to its parishioners and school parents which includes “Green” updates, and there are bulletin boards in the church and school with information. Gesu students have worked on ways to educate others on “what” can be recycled. Additionally, there is permanent signage on Gesu School’s front lawn and on the campus grounds to educate the community on bioswales and rain gardens. We hope this publication will also assist in getting the word out that we can all take steps, both large and small, to care for our common home—our planet Earth.



Bulletin Boards at the school and church



Gesu science club students made posters stating what can and cannot be recycled



Sign on Gesu's lawn to educate the community



Sacred Grounds Wildlife Habitat Designation

VIDEOS FEATURING GESU PARISH ENVIRONMENTAL WORK

National Wildlife Federation
video on Gesu composting:



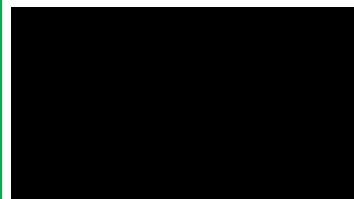
Channel 4 news story

**Detroit students
make it their
mission to reduce
waste on their
school campus**

*'We want to keep the
world healthy'*



Award winning Solar
video submitted to the
"My Solar" contest
sponsored by the
Ecology Center of
Ann Arbor, Michigan.



Detroiters for Environmental Justice
video presentation to Detroit City
Council. This video was made to ad-
vocate for more solar power in the
city.





ARTICLES FEATURING GESU PARISH ENVIRONMENTAL WORK

Article on Cool Congregations/Interfaith Power and Light website announcing Gesu as a 1st place winner in the 2021 Renewable Role Model category:



“In the Midwest, communities are ramping up the fight against Climate Change”, article on Grist blog talking about Gesu’s efforts



Article on Gesu’s efforts to convert the parking lot into a more environmentally friendly area. Gesu won Runner Up in the Sacred Grounds category.



Make Food Not Waste Blog “ Detroit Students Tackle Cafeteria Food Waste”



Reducing Cafeteria Waste



“Care for the Environment Alongside of Care for the Person.”



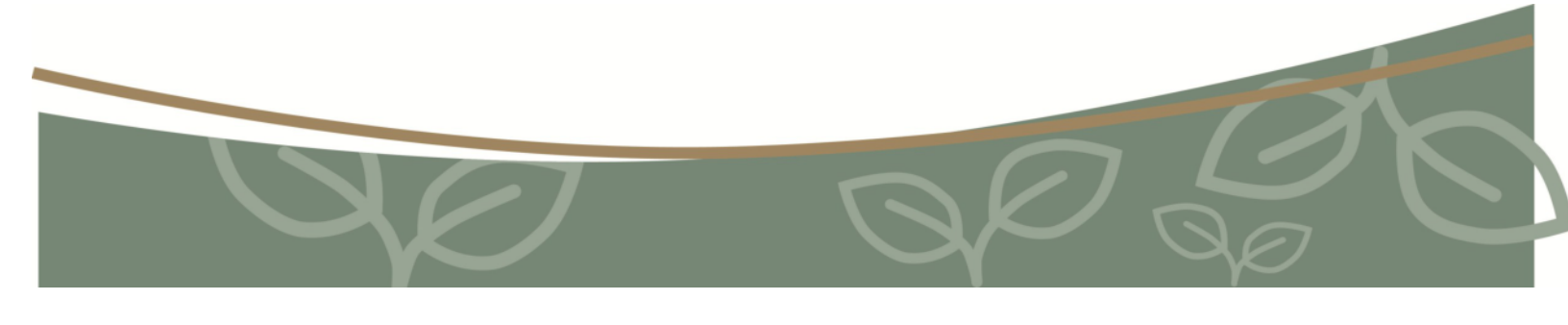


THANK YOU TO ALL WHO HAVE CONTRIBUTED

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- The Rady/O'Hara Family
- Ed and Elizabeth Stuckey
- National Wildlife Federation
- General Motors
- Freudenberg North America Limited Partnership
- Xerces Society
- Kathleen Barrett & Bruce Harper
- Sheila Zwieback
- Diane and Bruce Halle Foundation
- Michigan Interfaith Power & Light
- Interfaith Power & Light (National office)
- Catholic Climate Covenant
- Saints Peter and Paul Jesuit Church
- St. Suzanne's Catholic Church
- The Armando and Joan Ortiz Foundation
- Singing Tree
- Detroit 2030 District

Volunteer Groups:

- Gesu Students
 - Gesu Green Team
 - Gesu Parishioners
 - Gesu Staff
 - Gesu Parent Organization
 - University of Detroit Mercy
 - University of Detroit Jesuit High School and Academy
 - Mercy High School
 - National Wildlife Federation
 - Freudenberg North America Limited Partnership
 - Friends of the Rouge
 - The Nature Conservancy
 - Michigan State University
 - Sierra Club
 - Xerces Society
- 

Gesu Detroit Catholic Church

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Pastor:

Fr. Lorn Snow, S.J.

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