

RESTORExchange Religion &  
Sustainability Database: Improvements  
& Future Growth



**THE OHIO STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

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The Ohio State University, School of Environment  
& Natural Resources, EEDS Capstone Course

# Table of Contents

Project Members..... 3

Executive Summary..... 4

Introduction..... 5

Methods..... 6

    Interview I: Jerry Freewalt.....7

    Interview II: Cassandra Carmichael.....9

    Interview III: Jack Sullivan.....10

    Interview IV: Tim Van Meter.....11

Recommendations.....13

Conclusion.....15

Citations.....18

Appendices.....19

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## **Executive Summary**

We are a group of four students pursuing degrees in Ohio State's Environment, Economy, Development, and Sustainability (EEDS) major. This capstone project has been an opportunity to apply the skills we have gained through our coursework to create meaningful change in a real-world context.

The RESTORExchange database serves to provide helpful resources for faith-based sustainability work in communities, congregations, and families. Working in collaboration with Dr. Greg Hitzhusen and the database team we conducted research to help guide improvements for the next stages of site development. Specifically, we focused on identifying ways to enhance the functionality, visibility, accessibility, and networking capabilities of the database. Our research consisted of interviews with various faith and sustainability leaders in which we discussed their work, their experiences with the database, and their recommendations for its continued development.

Through these interviews, we gained insight into the sustainability work being done within faith communities, and the ways that the database can serve as a helpful source of information, opportunity, and community. Moving forward we recommend improving the site layout with clean visuals, a refreshed homepage, and religious modules. We also recommend the creation of a location-based page that shows local opportunities visually, and a page dedicated to small but meaningful ways to integrate sustainability into everyday life. As the database continues to evolve, we also believe it will be important to continue conversations with faith and sustainability actors to ensure that development is reflective of the communities it is intended to serve.

## **Introduction**

In August of 2020, our RESTORExchange capstone group began collaborating with Dr. Greg Hitzhusen and the database team. The RESTORExchange database is a collection of “reliable and helpful resources for faith-based sustainability work in communities, congregations and families....This database is designed to allow [community members] to find existing resources and also to upload...resources...to share with others” (Hitzhusen, G. E.). Through our project, we were tasked with conducting research to better understand the site and its audience, and to help guide development moving forward.

In determining the shape and direction of our project, we discussed various potential areas of focus. Initially we considered pursuing grant funding to support future site maintenance, as well as the development of an app. We were also interested in better understanding the audience of the database; how they would use the site, their interest in social media, the concept of sharing the platform, and what improvements could be made to the user interface to make it more user-friendly. Considering our limited time frame, we decided to narrow our project scope, choosing to focus primarily on finding out who the users would be, how they would like to use the database, what would make their user experience better, and the role of social media in increasing access.

In determining our research method, we felt that interviews with faith and sustainability leaders would provide a level of depth that would be helpful in truly understanding community experiences and needs moving forward. We also believe that continued conversations with these networks throughout database development will serve as a valuable touchstone. We reached out to four individuals who each hold positions in faith-based organizations with a focus on sustainability: Jack Sullivan from Ohio Council of Churches, Jerry Freewalt from Columbus

Diocese Creation Care Team, Tim Van Meter from Methodist Theological School of Ohio, and Cassandra Carmichael from The National Religious Partnership for the Environment. Each of these individuals, and their associated organizations, were selected based on their strong understanding of the communities they serve and the missions their organizations strive to accomplish.

The information provided by the interviewees helped determine several key recommendations for the database. In the report that follows, we will discuss these interviews, as well as the conclusions we have drawn from them, in-depth.

Our team recommends the following for the RESTORExchange:

- Create clean visuals and a clear and informative homepage with a distinct logo
- Create individual modules for every faith perspective
- Incorporate a section dedicated to “entry-level” sustainability efforts
- Create a visual map location-based page that shows local opportunities for engagement
- Implement a larger-scale survey after the website is closer to completion

## **Methods**

In conducting our research, we connected with leaders in faith and sustainability organizations. Through our informational interviews, we hoped to understand our interviewees’ work, their experiences with the database, and their recommendations for its continued development. We formatted our questions into three main topic areas: Professional Background, Intercommunications, and Database Features. We reached out to five contacts, and spoke with four; we were unable to connect with Marcia Dinkins from Ohio Interfaith Power and Light.

## **Interview I: Jerry Freewalt**

Our first interview was with Jerry Freewalt from the Catholic Diocese of Columbus on November 9th, 2020 (see Appendix A for Interview questions and Appendix B for the Interview notes). Mr. Freewalt is director of the Office of Social Action, and chair of the Creation Care Team for the Catholic Diocese of Columbus. He has been helping direct environmental programming of the diocese over the last ten years. He was already familiar with the database, as he took part in a survey from previous years that the database team conducted with a panel of individuals from the Catholic Diocese of Columbus. This provided us with a perspective for the current progress of the database, and what improvements can be made for future development. Mr. Freewalt made several comments about the current state of the database. When asked about the functionality and appeal to users, he mentioned how helpful it can be to maintain a simple layout. He did find the current layout of the database to be simple and easy to navigate. One possible improvement he stated was the addition of a more structured homepage and detailed description of the database to accompany it. This would facilitate a better understanding of the database's purpose to new users, and provide more guidance for use of the database. Mr. Freewalt also had a comment concerning the name of the database. He knew there were multiple options for the initial naming of the database, and thinks the RESTORExchange name is effective in portraying some of the database's purpose. However, he did mention that there could be a more descriptive name for it, as he finds the current one somewhat difficult to remember.

As for more fresh insight, we asked Mr. Freewalt questions regarding the Catholic Diocese of Columbus. We spoke about the ethnic diversity that is present amongst different parishes in the diocese. Specifically, Mr. Freewalt told us that there is geographical diversity in regards to ethnicity; as there are some parishes that are majority Spanish, Korean, and French.

This information led us to ask about the possible importance of incorporating a language translator within the database. He said that it wouldn't seem to be a crucial addition with the current state of the database, as local parish members of different ethnicities speak English as their primary language already. He did mention that, once the database is reaching a more national audience, it could be beneficial to incorporate a language translator. Not only because there would be a larger portion of users that speak different languages, but it would also help facilitate more of an international growth of the database.

Concerning language, Mr. Freewalt suggested that database translation could be helpful for children of different ethnicities that don't yet speak English fluently. This would still be a small portion of users, but the topic was expanded to encompass education systems in schools. He said that the database could be a very useful resource for teachers that want to incorporate lesson plans on religion and the environment into their educational curriculum. An important addition to this comment is that the Catholic Diocese of Columbus already has such curriculum-oriented schools within their organization. This presents a possible place to start the expansion of the database for organized educational purposes.

As for social media, Mr. Freewalt told us that the Catholic Diocese of Columbus currently uses Facebook and Twitter to communicate with their members, which could be important to determine the possible benefits of connecting the database to social media platforms. For key leaders, such as himself, the use of RESTORExchange is virtually all done on his laptop. However, he did mention that the vast majority of diocese members rely on their mobile phones for means of communication and gaining information, compared to his laptop use from being in his office for extended hours. That is how he visits the database to search for resourceful links and information to share with the diocese. For members, the use of mobile



phones will be more apt to promote the sharing of database links. By adding more direct methods to share database information on social media platforms, it can help expand the growth of the database (Freewalt, J. 2020).

### **Interview II: Cassandra Carmichael**

Our second interview was with Cassandra Carmichael on Tuesday, November 10th, 2020 over a private Zoom link (see Appendix A for Interview questions and Appendix B for the Interview notes). Cassandra is the Executive Director at the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. The National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE) is an alliance between the Evangelical Environmental Network, the National Council of Churches of Christ, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops with the intent to encourage people of faith to make a positive impact on the Earth and the beings that reside on it. We began by asking her about the ways in which she communicates and relays information to people within the NRPE. With this line of questioning, we were trying to determine the different forms of communication techniques that could be used to share the information found within the database to individuals and groups that Ms. Carmichael associates with. She responded that her main way of communicating with others is with one-on-one methods, including in-person meetings, phone calls, and emails. She mentioned that she does not use social media as a means of personally sharing information that NRPE is discussing.

With the next line of questioning, we asked about the ways in which Cassandra believed that the database would be useful. She discussed the idea that the ways in which the database can be useful could only be determined after the target or key audience has been established. She did later mention that it would be useful if there were a way for people to share informal personal stories outside of article-style entries.

Next, we began discussing the functionality of the database site. With this topic, Ms. Carmichael had a few specific recommendations she hoped would be implemented. The first was the addition of a location-based search system similar to one from a previous National Council of Churches database project. Other suggestions she had to improve the search function were to include a way to search for the most pertinent criteria: location, topic area, and religious affiliation. Another suggestion Cassandra had was to add additional useful specifications for the items and classes of topics so that they are more easily located. Her last recommendation was that there should be a way for people to log in so that they could submit information and entries into the database.

Lastly, we asked if there were any individuals or groups that would be useful for the database team to get in contact with in the future moving forward with this project. She suggested two people she thought would be good sources of information; Shantha Ready Alonso from Creation Justice Ministries, and Rabbi Daniel Schwartz from the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (Carmichael, C. 2020).

### **Interview III: Jack Sullivan**

We spoke with Rev. Dr. Jack Sullivan on November 15th, 2020 (see Appendix A for Interview questions and Appendix B for the Interview notes). As the executive director of the Ohio Council of Churches, Dr. Sullivan works to engage and connect congregations around social justice and environmental activism. In beginning our conversation, Dr. Sullivan discussed the need to make topics of sustainability less intimidating, and emphasized the power of recognizing opportunities to be more sustainable in our daily lives. We also discussed the tendency of faith and environmental work to align. To that end, Dr. Sullivan expressed that the RESTORExchange database could serve as a helpful resource for those hoping to better

understand their faith group's perspective on environmental issues, and ways to become more involved.

With regard to communication, Dr. Sullivan said that his network shares information primarily via email and through verbal discussions; they have some social media platforms, including Facebook, but there is little activity. He noted the recent increase in community engagement as events have shifted to Zoom, making community lectures and discussions more accessible to a wider audience. He was enthusiastic about the ways that the database could similarly serve to connect and mobilize communities around issues of sustainability, particularly among a younger audience.

In discussing specific database improvements, Dr. Sullivan emphasized the importance of ensuring that site content is well-organized and representative of diverse perspectives; when individual users can find information that connects their religious and environmental lives, they will be better able to engage in meaningful work. He was also interested in the creation of a feature displaying sustainability opportunities based on location.

Our discussion with Dr. Sullivan reinforced several of the points made by other interviewees, and provided valuable insight into the context and communities that the database serves (Sullivan, J. 2020).

#### **Interview IV: Tim Van Meter**

An interview was conducted with Dr. Tim Van Meter Monday, November 16th (see Appendix A for Interview questions and Appendix B for the Interview notes). Tim Van Meter is part of the Methodist Theological School in Ohio, one of 13 official seminaries of The United Methodist Church. It is one of the first to offer Ecology, Justice, and Ministry majors and specializations. This coupled with Tim's eco-theology background led to the interest in

interviewing him and getting his perspective. The interview began with a discussion of Dr. Van Meter's experience teaching in an online classroom setting during the Covid-19 pandemic. Classroom coordination has been challenging for his students; while before they would communicate in-person across a table, they are now working to find a similar style of discussion in this online setting. The course started being instructed over Microsoft teams; this technology was largely unfamiliar to the group, which created issues with having discussions. Issues ranged from connectivity and bandwidth to lack of understanding about how to complete tasks within the system. Zoom has been the most commonly used, but it is still not allowing for the same facilitation that Van Meter says he had before the pandemic. Informal face-to-face time is sorely missed; people that previously engaged in conversation 3-4 times a week now only have engaged in maybe 3-4 conversations total since March 2020. The lack of these discussions appears to have influenced students' mental and emotional well-being. This insight into ways that online education is succeeding within the faith community will guide what may be effective for encouraging similar communication through the database site.

Tim Van Meter reports using databases multiple times a week searching for content on faith and the environment that he can use in his classes. He pulls information from Yale.climate, Pew research, and PRRI.org (which does work on religion, politics, and world view). He knows that he will find 4-5 articles per month, or even per week, that are useful from these resources. He thinks that the RESTORExchange database is a great idea that would get considerable use from other like-minded educators who may be looking for a central location for this data. The opportunities for RESTORExchange to become a comparative teaching resource were heavily highlighted during the interview. He explained that many research sites have good connections between great publishers, and that going deeper through the initial stages of research will allow

for more effective progress in the field. This will also increase the accessibility of information as those lacking time or prior knowledge can find the information they are looking for in one central location.

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations were formulated through our analysis of interviews, as well as observations gathered throughout the construction of this project. We recommend conducting a larger survey through the networks established with RESTOREExchange collaborators after making a series of improvements to the site. Tim Van Meter and Jack Sullivan both supported this idea of waiting to conduct a larger survey until other recommendations have been implemented. This is because many users may be open to trying out the database if it is sent to them via email, but if they have a negative experience with it they are less likely to interact with the site again. Waiting to conduct a survey about broader demographic opinions on site functionality is therefore recommended in the future after incorporating the recommendations outlined below.

1. Designate a drop-down page / module for each religion that explains its core values / mission statement, and each's connection to the environment. Cite specific principles / faith texts can lend a degree of understanding about one's role in being a steward of the earth.
2. Restructure of the website to allow for a more user-friendly layout; design clean clear-cut pages and eliminate excess links and empty tags. Further develop the homepage welcome message and mission statement. Create a logo for RESTOREExchange to help increase visibility and foot traffic to the site.

3. Create a page with suggestions of ways to make small changes and efforts towards a more sustainable footprint; this may help make the issue of sustainability less “scary”, as Jack Sullivan said. This may be particularly helpful to those with minimal sustainability background who are trying to be more conscious, or incorporate achievable actions into their lives. Many faith communities are in rural areas or involve older age demographics, both of which are groups who tend to have less familiarity with this information, so it’s beneficial to help decrease the education gap due to the ubiquity of these communities.
4. Conduct larger-scale surveys after improvements to the website have been implemented. Jack Sullivan encouraged waiting until the website is more fully-developed so that users have a more positive early experience with the site.
5. Create a location feature so that people in communities can post about what is going on near them. This is to allow for different faith groups or sustainability advocates to coordinate and connect. A primary goal of this project was to recommend ways to improve facilitation of information between these two spheres. A map with a visual representation of what areas have posts and recent information will be able to be viewed by those outside of a local community as well.
6. Tim Van Meter from the Methodist Theological School in Ohio recommends that the database be used as a resource for students and different educators to reference. He said he uses sites like Pew Research and Yale to get information on climate and faith statistics. The Methodist Theological School in Ohio was one of

the first ministry schools to have a major and specialization in Ecology, Justice and Ministry. Having a baseline for comparative research would be helpful. Tim Van Meter says this would allow for more efficient and effective work done by students as they will not have to repeat work that has been completed.

These recommendations are to be implemented with the assistance of Erica Hu, an intern on the RESTORExchange team. Erica had set out to help restructure the database when she joined the team. We connected with her and collaborated on shaping the questions to be asked during the interviews. This was a huge help to our project team, and also provided Erica with insight about our goals of improvement for the database. After the implementation of these recommendations, she will help conduct more data collection to inform further improvements.

### **Conclusion**

The RESTORExchange database is still in its early development stages. It has mainly been developed in collaboration with religiously-affiliated organizations in Ohio, and a limited amount of national and international consultation. The perspectives of these partnering organizations has provided information that can inform next phases of database development, including reaching a larger audience. The interviews we conducted were aimed at gaining helpful answers and suggestions for several areas of improvement for the database.

We suggest several improvements to create a more user-friendly design. Creating an organized page for each religion can provide users with resourceful information about specific religions. Each page would explain the religion's values towards environmental topics and issues. Not only would this present a purpose for people of certain religions to practice better environmental stewardship, it would also allow people to understand shared environmental

values across different religions. There are other ways that a more structured homepage could also make the site more user-friendly. As Jerry Freewalt noted, a more appealing welcome page with a revised description of the database's purpose would serve as a good introduction for new users. Additionally, a detailed logo of the RESTORExchange is something that would enhance site visibility and reach more individuals.

We also commend Jack Sullivan's suggestion of incorporating a page that contains helpful resources and tips for lowering carbon footprints. This would help facilitate a clearer understanding for people who want to live more sustainable lifestyles, and relieve stress that is associated with such changes. It could also be beneficial to provide a way for users to search for information from organizations near the areas in which they live. As mentioned by Cassandra Carmichael, a map of database information would allow people to visualize the information being provided by organizations of different religious affiliations. This is important because environmental issues vary based on location, and religions may have different methods of approaching them. With this, we believe a map can increase networking opportunities that result from the database.

When thinking about more structured usage of the RESTORExchange, both Jerry Freewalt and Tim Van Meter suggested the possibility of use in schools; primarily with the idea of religious schools in mind, which would fit the religious content of the database while making links to religious environmental care. The database could be useful for grade school students all the way up to graduate students. This was a helpful contrast between Jerry Freewalt's and Tim Van Meter's suggestions. Mr. Freewalt suggested that, with grade school settings, the database provides a more focused source of information for teachers to form lesson plans. Dr. Van Meter suggested that, for college settings, it can help graduate students search for relevant information



to ensure they aren't missing existing research. Both of these support use of the database for organized educational purposes.

We believe some of the above recommendations should be implemented before further data collection is done. This is to prevent negative experiences that users may have, and reduce the chance that people will be deterred from the database. The interviews we have conducted for this project offer guidance in determining future target audiences. Connecting with leaders of faith organizations is crucial for development of the RESTORExchange database. In addition to the leaders we interviewed, we recommend including other personas in future interviews and target audiences. Pastors, teachers, and environmental directors would also be worth interviewing. Obtaining data from pastors and teachers would provide information on how the database can be more helpful for congregations and schools at local levels. Doing the same with environmental directors can help gauge what aspects of the database will best support the environmental efforts of faith communities and provide possible collaborations with environmental organizations. With this in mind, we recommend more large-scale data collection in future development efforts. After collaborating with Erica Hu of the database team, we concluded that it would be best to conduct more large scale data collection in the form of continued interviews and surveys. Once recommendations have been implemented, and development has taken place with the database, more fine-tuned questions about possible improvements can be addressed to a larger user audience.

## Citations

Carmichael, C. (2020, November 10). Personal Interview [Video Call].

Hitzhusen, G. E. (n.d.). RESTORExchange. Retrieved September 20, 2020, from <https://restorexchange.org/s/ohio-state-senr/page/about>

Freewalt, J. (2020, November 9). Personal Interview [Video Call].

(<https://columbuscatholic.org/care-for-creation>)

Sullivan, J. (2020, November 15). Personal Interview [Video Call].

Van Meter, T. (2020, November 16). Personal Interview [Video Call].

## Appendix A

### Potential Interview Questions

This appendix contains all the potential interview topics and subsequent questions that were of interest to the team. Not all questions listed were asked under each topic section, but all topic sections were discussed during each interview.

#### **Professional Background / Use of Database**

- What are the biggest challenges you face in your professional work?
- To what extent do you work with different databases or online networks in your job?  
How do you think digital databases can enhance your workflow?
- Do you know any environment and religion databases relevant to your work?
  - Is there anything you particularly like or dislike about them?
- What purposes do you think the RESTORExchange Database can serve?
- Who do you think would find our database useful?
- Are there any communities or organizations that you think would be interested in our database? Can you describe their characteristics?
- What would be their motivation to use the database and stay in touch with us? (for instance, would it be important to keep the database “unbranded” so that any organization that wanted to collaborate in building it could feature it on their website? (the reason for having the RESTORExchange domain name, rather than housing this on an osu.edu server, is so that this doesn’t seem like “Ohio State’s thing” but instead is open for joint development by collaborators)
- Are there any individuals whom you think we should get in contact with?

#### **Intercommunications**

- What’s the composition of different age/gender/ethnic groups in your professional and faith community?
- What social media do your professional and faith communities use? How is information shared among members?
  - Of all the digital platforms/tools you use, which ones are the most useful to your communities?
- Can you speak about the intergenerational connectivity in your current community’s activities?
- Are members of your communities mobile or desktop users? (What estimated percent of time do they spend on each?)
  - E.g. 40% mobile, 60% desktop
- What are the biggest challenges you face in communicating information to members of your organizations?

- E.g. disabilities, lack of access to electronic devices (the digital divide), lack of interest, etc.
- What trends and platforms have you observed \_\_\_\_\_ (key gateway connection they have to \_\_\_\_\_ community) using?
  - E.g. my faith communities use Newsletters the most
- What are some platforms or formats you would like to see more in your work and life regarding climate change or sustainability more generally?

## **Product Feature Questions**

### Overall Usability

- What are some suggestions you have for the current database?
- Is there anything you attempted to do but couldn't?
- How can we make the database more inclusive?
- Do you like the name of the database? (Do you think there is a better name we might consider? If so, what would that name be?)

### Home Page

- What do you think is the best use of the home page?

### Search Engine

- What is a good search system for the database? What are some essential filters that you can think of?
- How can we make information easier to find?

### Languages and Disability-Friendly Features

- Are there any people/groups within your organization that speak other languages? (If so) Do they use this language as one of their main ways to communicate?
  - On the scale of 1-10, how important do you think the multi-language feature is?

### Content

- Are there any topic areas that you didn't see but think should be included?
- Are there any specific topic areas that have a strong connection with your organization's efforts and values?
- What do you think could be the most effective way to present different forms of content?

These questions were part of a collaborative document between all of the capstone group members and Erica Hu from the RESTORExchange team. The topics included here were designed to provide insight into the areas of interest of the research team and to gather expert feedback about methods that could be used to improve the database.

## **Appendix B**

### Interview Notes

This appendix describes the notes from each interview. Each interview was conducted in the month of November by one or two of the capstone team members over unrecorded Zoom video calls. The question template from Appendix A was used to conduct each interview. To request the full notes from each interview described below, contact [hitzhusen.3@osu.edu](mailto:hitzhusen.3@osu.edu).

#### Dataset #1: RESTORExchange\_datasets.doc, section two

Source: Video call with Jerry Freewalt, director, Office of Social Concerns for the Catholic Diocese of Columbus ([www.columbuscatholic.org](http://www.columbuscatholic.org)); interviewers: Emily Martin, Christopher Winter, November 10, 2020.

Description: Notes from Zoom conversation with Jerry Freewalt about possible uses of and improvements to the RESTORExchange database. Interview questions were drawn from the question template provided in Appendix A.

#### Dataset #2: RESTORExchange\_datasets.doc, section one

Source: Video call with Cassandra Carmichael, executive director, National Religious Partnership for the Environment ([www.nrpe.org](http://www.nrpe.org)); interviewers: Cyrus Payne, Christopher Winter, November 10, 2020.

Description: Notes from interview with Cassandra Carmichael about possible uses of and improvements to the RESTORExchange database. Interview questions were drawn from the question template provided in Appendix A.

#### Dataset #3: RESTORExchange\_database.doc, section three

Source: Video call with Jack Sullivan, executive director, Ohio Council of Churches ([www.ohioucc.org](http://www.ohioucc.org)); interviewers: Rebecca Dye, Emily Martin, November 15, 2020.

Description: Notes from interview with Jack Sullivan about possible uses of and improvements to the RESTORExchange database. Interview questions were drawn from the question template provided in Appendix A.

Dataset #4: RESTORExchange\_dataset.doc, section four

Source: Video call with Tim Van Meter, associate professor, Methodist Theological School of Ohio ([www.mtso.edu](http://www.mtso.edu)); interviewers: Rebecca Dye, November, 16, 2020.

Description: Notes from interview with Tim Van Meter about possible uses of and improvements to the RESTORExchange database. Interview questions were drawn from the question template provided in Appendix A.