

Healthy soils, healthy souls

by Karla Hignite



The stewardship of soil scientist John Doran

Some call it dirt. Farmers know different. So does John Doran. He knows that right under our feet, one of the mysteries and miracles of creation is at work each day, supporting the vegetation upon which God's host of created beings depend for physical sustenance.

John also knows the importance of maintaining a healthy soil so the land will continue to produce. As a soil scientist with the US Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service and adjunct faculty member at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, John has for the past 27 years conducted research toward enhancing soil quality and crop production while also preserving the health of the environment. His life's work recently received international recognition, with a sizeable grant that he's now using to fund the good work of other individuals and organizations. An active member of Antelope Park Church of the Brethren in Lincoln, his faith sustains and guides his work.

A great cloud of witnesses

John became a soil scientist, in part, because of the influence of a childhood friend whose father was a soil chemist and would take the boys to his lab on weekends where they conducted greenhouse experiments. But the *kind* of soil scientist John became was perhaps most influenced by the Brethren with whom he came in contact. On occasion, John's father, an auditor with the Internal Revenue Service in Washington, D.C., would take John and his family to the hills and hollows of Virginia for weekend escapes from urban living. It was there that John met his wife, Janet. Soon John started attending church with Janet's family, who were Brethren, and began learning about a different way of living.

John and Janet married in 1966 in the home of the minister of Calvary Church of the Brethren in Winchester, Va., after a blizzard canceled their church wedding three days before. Almost 10 years later—once he had earned his Ph.D. at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.—John, Janet, and then two-year-old daughter, Karin, moved to Nebraska where John accepted a position as soil scientist with the USDA Agricultural Research Service at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Since then, the family has grown to include son-in-law Michael and grandchildren Fayth and Drew.

Janet, the oldest of eight children, says her family didn't have a lot when she was growing up. Her father owned a small sawmill and sold lumber. "There were times when my father didn't get paid for his work, but he never demanded payment from anyone," says Janet. "Money is nice, but it's not everything. I was brought up learning from my parents to help others."

Those ethics of simplicity and service became an early influence for John and were reflected by other Brethren who crossed his path. John met Stan Dell in 1967 when Stan came to the University of Maryland as a Brethren alternative service worker in agricultural aid. A post-World War II science revolution had spawned interest in grain production by chemical companies eager to feed the world, says John. "At the time, many of us thought this was the right thing to do. But Stan was dissatisfied and didn't feel he was helping anyone, so he stood by his faith and got reassigned to disaster relief work at New Windsor, Md."

A decade later, Doran was influenced by another Brethren, I. W. Moomaw, whose career was devoted to "agricultural evangelism," bringing to the fore the work needed to feed the world's multitudes as well as the

associated environmental concerns of doing so. "So many times for me the awareness and sensitivity to the world around us and to social justice and peace issues came from the well of the church, from those striving to follow the example of Christ," says John.

Throughout his career, John has carried these and other faith witnesses with him. In November 2000, John and Janet flew to Greece where John received a \$250,000 Onassis Award for his development of a soil quality test kit and for his longtime work in identifying indicators that help farmers understand how to treat their soils. That put John in the company of heads of state—including former US president Jimmy Carter—who have received the prestigious award. But John has learned humility along the way. "We don't have a claim on anything. It's by God's grace that we have what we have," says John.

Freely received, freely give

Who wants to be a millionaire? "Not me," says John. From the moment he and Janet first heard he would receive the award, they knew they wouldn't keep the money. "I probably could have leveraged that and some of our own financial resources to set us up to be millionaires, but then what do you really have besides a million dollars?" says John.

Instead, they used \$200,000 to open a charitable gift fund through Brethren Foundation (see "Faithful philanthropy" sidebar) so that the money could have a lasting impact for funding projects and people working on behalf of the environment, peace, and social concerns. Even though 2001 was a bad year for the US economy, their Renewing Earth and People (REAP) gift fund still provided \$5,000 in earnings that was

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John Doran in his laboratory.



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then distributed among an agricultural project in Honduras, an institute in Kansas developing alternative crops and farming practices, and several General Board-related environmental and peace projects.

The Dorans contributed another \$25,000 to their congregation, the Antelope Park Church of the Brethren in Lincoln, Neb., for local initiatives that provide opportunities for enhancing spirituality and stewardship awareness. Congregational leaders administer the fund through an office established within the church. Contributions have already boosted the programming of the local church camp, Camp Mount Hermon in Tonganoxie, Kan. The remaining \$25,000 of the Onassis Award, minus taxes, is being used by the Dorans to administer REAP gift requests.

Becoming new creations

Where John stood in Athens delivering his acceptance speech for the Onassis Award was a mere 10 miles from the Areopagus where the Apostle Paul shared his knowledge of the “unknown god” that the Athenians recognized. “It seemed like everywhere Janet and I turned during that trip, we were confronted by Paul, reminded of the power and wealth of that elite group we were with,

and of how much we have materially in our own nation compared to the rest of the world,” says John. In his own modern-day translation, John could hear Paul telling the gathered community to “get with the program.”

“There is no way that I can give enough thanks to the community of faith for sharing the real message of Christ with me—in the words of Paul, to live no longer for yourselves, but through Christ, to become the creatures that God intends you to be,” says John. Inherent in that freedom is a calling to make a difference. John’s professional work as well as his spiritual life has been shaped by the recognition that we need to live differently in this world. “I think that with all our advanced technologies, we have gotten away from the basics of understanding the natural cycles of nature and understanding the natural world. We may argue about whether we are really experiencing global warming or whether ozone depletion is occurring, but the fact remains that we have the technological capabilities to influence the global balance,” says John. “We now recognize for the first time in the history of civilization that we have the technological capabilities to influence the global environment, and that is an event of serious consequence.”

From John’s understanding, one of humanity’s greatest needs is finding resource-friendly ways to meet a growing human population’s demands for food and fiber while maintaining environmental stability and conserving resources for future generations. To that end, one of the groups receiving funds from the Dorans’ REAP gift fund is The Land Institute in Salina, Kan., where Wes Jackson has for years been working to develop crops that don’t require the mas-

sive amounts of fertilizer, pesticides, petrochemicals, and invasive harvesting techniques common to today’s farming practices.

Healthy food sources begin with healthy soils. Among the soil attributes John’s test kit measures is the level of nitrates present. “Some communities in Nebraska still have to drink bottled water because of the pollution in groundwater sources resulting from the heavy nitrogen fertilizers used in the 1970s,” says John. In all, the kit tests and measures 10 different soil conditions or properties, including the levels of salts and carbon dioxide present and the ability for water to penetrate the soil and for plants to make use of soil nutrients—all indicators of soil health. John’s soil test kit, a collection of simple tubes and measuring devices, has been picked up by a manufacturer, is being commercially marketed, and is receiving worldwide distribution.

Serving one another in love

But as John sees it, “The children of the next millennium won’t care how articulate we were in debating soil quality and sustainability. They will care if there is adequate food for all and a natural world from which they can renew their spirits and their souls,” says John. “In my interactions with different countries, I understand clearly that we have such an opportunity to lay out a blueprint of where we need to go, and yet we keep getting sucked into development criteria that are based only on our own short-term concerns for personal and national economic benefit.”

While John’s professional work centers on indicators of soil health, his faith is shaped by an understanding of certain indicators of spiritual health. Among them is the need to remain focused on the fact that faith is never an individual journey and that we’re never done traveling, says John. Proverbs 16:3—“Commit your work to the Lord”—remains one of many biblical reminders for John.

“There are many ways individuals can use the resources they have to carry out the work of the church,” says John. “The Lincoln congregation has witnessed to me through its simple living and living the upside-down kingdom,” says John. “Without this, I don’t think I’d have had the sensitivity I do toward living in service to others and sharing my gifts with others in need.” ❧

Karla Hignite is a former employee of Brethren Benefit Trust who now lives in Colorado.

Faithful philanthropy through a Charitable Gift Fund

John and Janet Doran never envisioned receiving such a large financial award. But they’re glad the \$200,000 charitable gift fund (CGF) they established through Brethren Foundation can benefit church programs for many years to come. The Dorans established

a CGF in large part because they knew the investment would reflect Brethren values, since all Brethren Foundation investments are made according to socially responsible investment criteria. “A money ministry provides the opportunity for the people ministry, and that to me is the most important thing,” says John. “The charitable gift fund is a good financial tool for helping other people.”

But donors don’t need \$200,000 to establish a CGF. Nor must they contribute one lump sum. Individuals can donate small increments and let funds accumulate over time for eventual disburse-

ment to specified charitable organizations. At any time a donor or a committee named by the donor can recommend fund distributions. As long as the goals of recipient organizations are consistent with Brethren values, the foundation will make the gift.

Donors are also allowed income tax deductions for gifts made and can avoid capital gains taxes associated with gifts of appreciated securities or real estate. Likewise, earnings from the fund accumulate with no tax implications to the donor.

Foundation CGF funds currently total about \$500,000. Recipient organizations range from denominational agencies, nursing homes, and camps, to ecumenical agencies such as Amnesty International and Church World Service, to local food banks, fire departments, and prison ministries.

According to Will Thomas, director of Brethren Foundation Operations, donor-advised funds such as the foundation’s CGF provide a good option as part of an estate-planning tool or an overall strategy for philanthropy.

For more information about Brethren Foundation’s charitable gift fund, go to www.brethrenbenefittrust.org, or call 888-311-6530.

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John (far left) and Janet Doran (far right) meeting with the local REAP Committee.



Wes Jackson, director of the Land Institute, which has benefited from a gift fund established by the Dorans.

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