

People have asked what the motivation behind this project is. Why are we taking time to hang Christmas lights on the trees around Unity's campus?

In a community that loves tradition (let's just look at our Tulip Festival and other things in our town) this allows us to continue the tradition of hanging Christmas lights. This is a tradition rooted in Christian values and beliefs and what our country was founded on. This tradition originated in Germany in the 1600s where Christians placed real candles on trees to symbolize Christ being the light of the world¹. From there it spread through all of Europe. In 1894, President Cleveland helped the popularity in America by hanging the electric lights (a much safer alternative) on the White House Tree². In a culture that has been eliminating Christ from everything, from banned school prayer in 1962, to removing mandatory Bible readings in 1963, or the famous, possibly infamous 1904 removal of "In God We Trust" from coins by Theodore Roosevelt³. Or the more recent, you have to say, "Happy Holidays", NOT "Merry Christmas"⁴. We need to maintain traditions where Christ is the very core.

This project also aims to create a positive school association and a sense of community within the school but also Orange City by making a welcoming atmosphere to our property. These lights could create positive memories and associations for students and boost morale. In my years of teaching I have noticed students often talk negatively about school; the homework, the tests, all the requirements, state testing, rules, all the things they aren't allowed to do, etc. The hope is to create a positive environment for the school grounds. Deborah Serani, an author and psychologist, says, Christmas lights create a neurological shift that can produce the feeling of happiness. Decorating and seeing Christmas decorations will cause a spike in dopamine⁵. Dopamine is the feel-good hormone. A study from the Swiss National Science Foundation⁶ found that exposure to color can reduce stress and anxiety. "Trends in anxiety among adults in the United States, 2008-2018: Rapid increases among young adults"⁷ concluded anxiety has increased from 5.12% in 2008 to 6.68% in 2018 among adult Americans. The most notable change was seen in ages 18-25. It showed an increase from 7.97%-14.66%. Another study, by Anderson et. al.⁸ says only 47% of Gen Z members (age 12-26) consider themselves to be thriving. 59% of millennials, 57% of Gen X, and 52% of baby boomers consider themselves thriving. From January 2016-December 2022 the monthly antidepressant dispensing rate increased by 66.3% for ages 12-25. As an institution in charge of the wellbeing (physically, emotionally, and spiritually) of the students in our building, this needs to be something we are aware of and addressing.

In a study⁹ (2018-2024) of nearly 6,000 students from 12 different schools, the question was asked, "What helps students love their Christian School?" What creates student satisfaction and loyalty to a school? Students in this study evaluated their school based on five categories: school culture, faith integration, academics, student experience, and facilities and resources. The findings, school atmosphere is strongly linked to loyalty and satisfaction. If a student described their school as being caring (0.52, $p < 0.01$), friendly (0.54, $p < 0.01$), and community-oriented (0.051, $p < 0.01$), they were more likely to say they loved their school and recommend it (0.56, 0.58, and 0.56 respectively). Rigor in academics and beautiful facilities are nice, but if students feel outcast and out of place their satisfaction drops significantly. Unity

describes itself as being distinctly Christian. Students notice and value this characteristic. Biblical integration/Christian worldview (0.53, $p<0.01$), having godly role models (0.51, $p<0.01$), and building godly character (0.51, $p<0.01$) were strongly correlated with overall student loyalty and satisfaction and their likelihood of recommending (0.54, 0.52, 0.51 respectively). This project aims to weave these two things, atmosphere and biblical integration, together in a cohesive and fun way.

Having these lights would also increase the sense of community with our students, but also Orange City. It makes our property more welcoming in the dreary days of winter. Community members can drive/walk by our property and receive the benefits of the lights. The lights would also be seen driving into Orange City and will give a welcoming appearance to our town. It also gives a welcoming appearance as parents, students, and community members arrive and depart from sporting events. It will set our school apart from any other school in the area. As a parent of little kids, we drive around town looking for houses that are decorated well. This will give us and other families with little kids a destination to see Christmas lights.

Unity believes in the Knights' Armor¹⁰. Community-builders - those who pursue and build communal shalom and joy. Beauty-creators: those who celebrate God's creation by creating and enjoying what is good and beautiful. We are putting this into practice in a fun and unique way.

This project meets the requirements of being an arboretum and a donation source for the arboretum and aquaponics system. We need one community event a year to be an accredited arboretum. This is our community event to have people walk/drive past the property during the Christmas season. There are costs associated with the use of our aquaponics program and arboretum. Any donations will be used to offset those expenses and be more self-funded and expand the program. If you are interested in sponsoring a tree please contact khaan@unity.pvt.k12.ia.us. We would love more support and lights!

Our mission is to, "Proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord of all."¹¹ Just like the star of Bethlehem led the wise men to Jesus, we too are striving to do the same. We are leading students and coming alongside them to show them Jesus rules over all. Every part of Christmas decorations has symbolism to Christ. The tree, the triangular shape, stars, angels, candy canes, but especially light. In John 8:12 Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness..."¹² In Matthew 5:14-16 it says, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." Christmas lights represent this joy and hope. This time of year, as daylight hours become less and less and darkness begins to cover the area, it can represent victory against the darkness. It represents Jesus coming and pursuing us in our darkness. Jesus' birth is victory over darkness. John 1:5, says that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. This is what Christmas lights symbolize. We are meant to reflect Jesus' light and his radiance to everyone we meet. Or as the children's song says, this little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine. It goes

on to say, “hide it under a bushel, No!”¹³ The Genesis Arboretum is using this to proclaim the symbolism of the Christmas season to others. Ultimately, we are trying to bring Christ back into Christmas.

We believe that if we do the Christmas lights right, we can get people talking about how Unity is different; how we have fun, we care about our atmosphere, we are looking to improve and implement new things, we care about students and getting students involved, bring some joy to Orange City, and literally get people looking at Unity!

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