

EarthKeepers address environmental and spiritual concerns

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Tyle Vandever (first on left) listens intently with fellow EarthKeepers-in-training to a speaker at St. Peter's Catholic Church in St. Paul, Minn., community garden and prayer trail. (Photo: Courtesy of EarthKeepers)

ATLANTA – “EarthKeepers training has given me a real sense of community. I know I am not alone in my passion for the importance of the care of creation,” the Rev. Laura Nordstrom said of her EarthKeepers training experience this fall.

Indeed, she is not alone. She was commissioned by Global Ministries on November 19 as one of 67 EarthKeepers trained and sent back to their communities with a better grasp on how to push their environmental projects forward. Some attended in-person training in either Baltimore, Maryland, or St. Paul, Minnesota, while others attended online. This group of EarthKeepers represents 30 annual conferences and all five U.S. jurisdictions. Participants include clergy, laity, annual conference staff and agency staff.

During the commissioning, General Secretary Roland Fernandes of Global Ministries assured the candidates that their creation care work is vital and blesses their communities, and that Global Ministries affirms their call from God to the ministry of creation care.



A sign posted at Hamline UMC in St. Paul, Minnesota. Hamline is dedicating a portion of its property to prairie restoration. (Photo: Courtesy EarthKeepers)

“Global Ministries and the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) join communities around the world on the front lines of extreme weather events that have been exacerbated by climate change,” Fernandes noted. “The increasing number and intensity of these events are directly connected with humanity’s impact on

God's creation. I've been with UMCOR for 30 years and I remember, there were some years with no hurricanes in the U.S. Today, we run out of the alphabet naming storms every year."

EarthKeepers are asked to come to training with a project idea they've already hatched. The program supports people looking to turn an idea into action as well as those who want to deepen an existing ministry. Participants develop plans in conversation with their peers, in a place where they can troubleshoot ideas and develop strategies with experienced trainers and people who share their passion for the stewardship of the Earth.

"When I went to the training, I knew that my project would be about prairie restoration," Nordstrom continued. She pastors Stewartville United Methodist Church, which sits on 12 acres of former farmland on the outskirts of Stewartville, Minnesota. The congregation has been considering God's will for their land resources and how to develop a space for the local community.

"Through conversations at the training, I was able to hone the idea down to something doable. I think that was very, very helpful."

Projects for all kinds of churches

Projects included not just use of land but reducing landfill waste as well. Janet Marshall-Tate, from Connecticut in the New York Conference, is developing "FlexCollects," to target collection of plastic bags, plastic packaging, bubble wraps, shrink wraps, cereal box liners, dry cleaning bags, retail plastic packaging – all the stuff people throw out that ends up in landfills because most municipal recycling programs don't accept it.

In many cases, municipalities dig landfills in areas that are close to low-income neighborhoods and those where Black, Indigenous and other people of color reside. Reducing the toxicity in the air and soil by eliminating some of the pollutants can improve the environments surrounding the landfill.

Daniel Hiatt will be working on industrial composting on the Mount Eagle Retreat Center campus in Clinton, Arkansas. He hopes to reduce waste and the resulting downstream effects that contribute to greenhouse gas emissions.

Composting will become a new way to engage people on campus and in the community while producing life-giving soil amendments for the greater production of foods grown.

The Rev. Kevin Brown at Mt. Washington UMC in Kentucky pastors a church which, like Nordstrom's, has a big land footprint. His congregation has a vision of creating a community garden that will become a fresh expression ministry – perhaps an extension of the church's ministry to a community that prefers to meet and worship outdoors.

"This idea that we had for a community garden wasn't mine," said Brown. "But I'm fully supportive of it. It's unique and a little bit edgy. It will take quite a bit of commitment."



EarthKeeper Donna Thompson, from North Carolina, pitches in to help with a community garden being developed by Allen AME Church in Baltimore. (Photo: Thea Becton)

Pastor Brown and two younger parishioners from Mt. Washington, Tyler Vandever and Emily Allison, are the first EarthKeepers commissioned from Kentucky. "We wanted to address both food insecurity and spiritual insecurity, so from the beginning, we were incorporating the idea of feeding people spiritually as well as physically," noted Brown.

Allison lives in a nearby apartment complex: "I don't have much property of my own, just a small balcony that holds six large pots and that's it. So, I thought, I'm not the only one in that situation. It would be nice to have an area that we could garden – and eat what we garden – that would supplement my groceries. I like to buy organic produce, but that can get a little pricey."

Vandever noted, “We had the idea for the community garden, and through the training, we narrowed it down in stages, what we were going to do this year and next year – and we developed a five-year plan.” The plan now includes a solar and water catchment system. And the raised platform beds will be accessible for wheelchairs and others for whom working on the ground might be challenge.

Sent out as one caring community

Bishop Lanette Plambeck from the Dakotas-Minnesota Episcopal Area, who also serves with the Native American Comprehensive Plan, officiated the online commissioning service. Her homily was rooted in Mark 4: 35-41, in which

Jesus, with his disciples in a boat, calms the storm.

“It’s not just the miracle itself,” she said, “but the relationship it reveals between Jesus and creation – between the Holy and Creation. The wind and the waves know his voice. They obey, not out of compulsion, but of recognition of the one who brought them into being. This moment in the Gospel is a declaration. All creation belongs to God.”

“This commissioning is not simply about stewardship,” the bishop noted. “It’s about discipleship. Caring for creation is not a peripheral task of the church. It is central to the Gospel. When we care for the Earth, we proclaim Jesus’ lordship over all creation.”

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Global Ministries’ Environmental Sustainability program leads sustainability initiatives within the agency, in collaboration with other United Methodist agencies and in support of churches and ministries throughout The United Methodist Church. Learn more about this program at <https://umcmmission.org/environmental-sustainability>.