News
EarthBeat



Fr. Frederick Daley, pastor of All Saints Church, blesses a tree planted by some of the members of the Caring For Our Common Home environmental task force in Syracuse, New York, in summer 2023. The task force just won the 2024 Cool Congregations Challenge in the "Community Inspiration" category. (Courtesy of Michael Songer)



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When Kathy Gosh and Marijane Reilly founded the Caring For Our Common Home Task Force at All Saints Church in Syracuse, New York, in 2015, they could never have imagined that their group would win multiple grants and awards. It all began after Pope Francis in 2015 published his encyclical about environmental care, "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home," and their activism gradually grew over the years.

"When he came out with this as one of his first things, I thought that was just so powerful. I was terribly excited," said Kathy Gosh, 75. "I just had hope. It kind of gave me a sense of hope that we could help prevent the damage we were doing."

Like her friend and fellow activist Reilly, Gosh is a retired science teacher. She spent the last 12 years of her career at the Onondaga Nation School in nearby Nedrow. In the same time period, witnessing the effects of fracking heightened her sensitivity to environmental issues.

In less than 10 years, the task force has managed to surpass many of the goals it set for itself, and just won the 2024 Cool Congregations Challenge in the "Community Inspiration" category, an annual competition that celebrates exceptional efforts of U.S. religious congregations to combat climate change within their facilities and communities.



Members of the All Saints Church environmental task force discuss the management of their native plants garden in Syracuse, New York, in summer 2023. (Courtesy of Michael Songer)

The competition is sponsored by Interfaith Power & Light, or IPL, a national organization that works to mobilize people of faith and conscience to combat climate change.

"I've been sort of a champion for the earth since the '70s. When Laudato Si' came out, I felt hopeful and inspired to join to do something," said Reilly, 68. She said she was encouraged to lead the group. "I always refer to myself as a pusher. Sometimes they don't like that, but I do."

She said the task force's first efforts were inspired by books, including Just Water: Theology, Ethics, and the Global Water Crisis by theologian Christiana Z. Peppard, Braiding Sweetgrass by botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer and Laudato Si'.

The task force organized presentations, meetings, retreats and other events on environmental issues, and over the years grew to 50 members, from both inside and outside the parish. The task force created a parish website and encouraged its use; reduced parish mailings with an opt-in email program for the parish bulletin; completed an LED lighting project; invited parishioners to participate in a community solar energy program; supported and expanded a native plants garden, and won grants to remove invasive species.



A native plants expert trains a group of Congolese refugees in the All Saints Church environmental task force's garden in Syracuse, New York, in summer 2023. (Courtesy of Michael Songer)

For two years, the task force at All Saints contributed in creating a "spiritual conversion" journey for parishioners. They held liturgies specially focused on caring for the earth during Earth Week and in October, honoring St. Francis of Assisi during the Season of Creation. They posted inserts in the newsletter, giving people ideas of how they might experience a spiritual conversion to take action and change their

environmental lifestyle.

They offered spiritual nature walks around the neighborhood, to help participants "to immerse in nature, solitude and prayer," after which they gathered and shared reflections. This Lent, the task force is summarizing the Gospel for each Sunday, discussing a "Fast" or sacrifice that parishioners are willing to make for others, with a plan of action.

Over 200 Catholic Congolese refugees and asylum-seekers have recently found temporary shelter at All Saints. Being a sanctuary parish, it has provided for accommodation to families, offering them legal and social support until they could stabilize their position. Other refugees have found refuge in apartments scattered across the city.

"One woman bought a house, so we went to plant a tree on her property," explained Reilly, underlining that even the smallest actions had for them a meaning of embracing and listening to the others' needs. "Kathy Gosh was very instrumental in getting Congolese kids to join an environmental youth group in the summer in Syracuse, and they were planting trees," she added.

According to Amanda Baugh, a professor of religious studies and director of the masters program in sustainability at California State University, Northridge, Catholic lay parishioners are often more active on environmental issues than their bishops.



Fr. Frederick Daley, pastor of All Saints Church, with some of the Congolese refugees of the environmental youth group sponsored by the task force, in Syracuse, New York, in summer 2023 (Courtesy of Michael Songer)

"The U.S. bishops have often read Laudato Si' in different ways than the Catholics who already supported environmentalism," she said. "In many cases they have read it not really as an environmental document, but with a religious or spiritual lens, like it happens to include the environment as one topic among many, but they'll point out that it deals with other issues like noise pollution and abortion."

The task force has not yet decided how it will spend its $1,000 Cool Congregations prize. But Gosh and Reilly said that — besides their dream to build a new green church campus — two needs of the moment are the advocacy about the upcoming elections "and the division in the country between groups as to whether climate change is a hoax or not," and how to support Syracuse's poorest communities with free food from sustainable farms.

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"We want our parish to be a model for other parishes. In other words, we want to walk the talk. If we're saying this, we need to be an example," said Gosh, adding that their next proposal to the parish pastoral council will be to establish an internal mechanism whereby any decision the parish makes in the future on any matter must first receive an environmental opinion from the task force.

"So many people look at environmental things as strictly political or economical, and it is. You can't deny that," she said. "But it's also a part of our spiritual core."

When on the first Sunday in March Fr. Frederick Daley, All Saints' pastor since 2008, announced at the end of Mass that the task force had won the IPL award, parishioners applauded wildly, the priest told EarthBeat.

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>
> —Kathy Gosh, All Saints Church in Syracuse, New York
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Daley defined his parish as "mission oriented," and noted its many other task forces, including those which focus on anti-racism, the LGBTQ community, women and people with disabilities.

"It really just flowed naturally, from our vision, the vision of the Gospel, that we're all connected with one another," Daley said "We're all connected to Mother Earth, and what hurts one person, hurts all of creation."