News
EarthBeat



Grow It organizer Leah Reichardt-Osterkatz, right, helps children make smoothies from strawberries they picked, plus kale grown on the farm, at Spring Forest in Hillsborough, North Carolina, on Wednesday, May 29, 2024. (RNS/Yonat Shimron)

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On a warm, sunny morning in farm country, a group of 40 preschoolers and their parents fanned out across several rows of crops to pluck strawberries from beneath crowns of green leaves.

Later, the children sliced the berries they had gathered and added bananas, kale and yogurt to blend into smoothies before heading out to feed chickens and goats. They then strolled through a wooded trail (spotted a turtle!) and took turns at a pair of swings hanging from a tree. The morning concluded with an outdoor lunch prepared by a dietitian and chef.

The outing Wednesday morning (May 29) was part of a wellness program called Grow It, one of several offered to young families living in North Carolina's Triangle region by Spring Forest, a farm and new monastic community, or "farmastery."

The 23-acre farm is located amid lush green meadows and stands of pine about 5 miles north of Hillsborough, a historic town best known as a haven for artists and writers. In 2016, Elaine Heath, an ordained United Methodist and a former dean of the Duke Divinity School, settled down here with her husband, Randall Bell, and launched a small community known as the Church at Spring Forest.

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Heath developed the idea of a shared life of faith while teaching in Texas, at Dallas' Perkins School of Theology. But the idea has come into full bloom on this farm, which grows food, supports refugee resettlement and provides outdoor retreats for people in the healing professions.

"The No. 1 purpose of the farm is to foster circles of community," said Heath, who serves as the community "abbess," traditionally the female superior in a community of nuns, but here the pastoral leader.

"Fostering community has always been important, but especially now because our culture is so polarized," she added. "Gathering people around food, growing food, preparing food, eating food, sharing food — that breaks down all these barriers and assumptions people have."

The farm cultivates 3 acres of fruits and vegetables and 3 acres for livestock. It sells vegetables and eggs through its CSA, or community supported agriculture model, in which people buy shares in advance of the growing season and then get a weekly box of produce. (Though the farm is not certified organic, it uses organic methodology, which means the land is farmed without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers.)



Joan Thanupakorn, of Durham, North Carolina, pushes her daughter, Nora, on a swing hanging from a tree during a Grow It wellness program for children at Spring Forest in nearby Hillsborough, on May 29, 2024. (RNS/Yonat Shimron)

But it is also organized as a faith community, part of the new monastic movement that began three decades ago among lay Protestants who looked to Roman Catholic and particularly Celtic Christianity for inspiration on how laypeople could work, eat and worship as a community.

Spring Forest has four family units living on the farm, but 16 people in total who consider themselves part of the core community, even if some live miles away. Those 16 are committed to the rule of life at Spring Forest: prayer, work, table, neighbor and rest.

The whole group gathers Monday through Friday at 8 a.m. for a 30-minute Zoom meeting, where they share concerns and read prayers they have written. Once a month there's an in-person Saturday worship service — so as not to compete with area churches that hold services on Sunday. The farm has no physical church building, and the service typically takes place outdoors, followed by a meal.

Along with the regulars, there are a handful of divinity school students from Duke and Perkins who serve as interns. (The church is part of the United Methodist Church's "Fresh Expressions" initiative.)



Goats graze at Spring Forest farm in Hillsborough, North Carolina. (Courtesy of Elaine Heath)

Despite the deep Christian commitments of its core members, Spring Forest sees itself as collaborating with people from other faith traditions or no faith tradition.

Grow It, the Wednesday morning program for children and parents, has no faith component. Central to the program is a group of mothers and children, refugees from Afghanistan, who have settled in the area. Volunteers from the farm pick them up in an old church bus and bring them back to their homes. Spring Forest also provides transportation to a Friday English as a Second Language class at a nearby church.

Shaima Muradi, a Muslim woman originally from Afghanistan, coordinates the refugee outreach and serves as a translator and liaison. She said the mothers appreciate the opportunity to let their children roam outdoors, connect with nature and eat a nutritious lunch. "These families don't have any knowledge of the community and once they start coming, they feel so comfortable, they love it, and it's no pressure, we're all happy here," said Muradi.

Heath was helping her Perkins students organize a shared home for a group of African refugees living in subpar rentals in Dallas when she first got involved with

alternative faith communities. She especially credits a former student, an immigrant from Kenya named Francis Kinyua, now a UMC pastor in Nebraska, with helping her establish Spring Forest after introducing her to ideas about regenerative farming wrapped around a life of work and prayer.



Spring Forest, a working farm and a new monastic community in Hillsborough, North Carolina, dedicated this meadow with its majestic willow oak to healing the land from trauma. Residents call it the Grandmother Tree, because it is a place of comfort, welcome and unhurried time. (RNS/Yonat Shimron)

The farm on which Spring Forest sits was once home to a Black family whose house was set on fire in an act of racial violence in the 1960s. For that reason, Heath dedicated the piece of the land around a chimney that remained as a place of healing for different kinds of trauma, including trauma to the Earth.

Joan Thanupakorn, who lives in Durham, was at Wednesday's Grow It event with one baby on a carrier strapped to her chest and another walking through the woods with her father. She and her husband have taken on a challenge of spending 1,000 hours outdoors this year, or about three hours a day, she said.

"It's so nice to get some hours in," Thanupakorn said. "And there's not a lot of low-cost things in the area, and so it's nice to have something that's affordable." (Grow It is free.)

Piotr Plewa, a visiting scholar at Duke University, came with his son, Max. He said he liked the exposure to refugee children and also the lessons about farming.

"Here kids can see that they can pick up a strawberry from the ground and eat it," Plewa said. "There are people who think that a fruit is only good if you buy it from a store."

Those are the kinds of lessons Heath is happy for children to learn.

Heath, whose main chore on the farm is caring for the goats, said that is the kind of learning that lies at the heart of Christianity, which she likes to practice more than to preach.

"We're creating a deeply contemplative community that's also very active in the world and that's here for our neighbors," she said. "For me, Christian discipleship is really about creating communities and helping people to love well."