

Sr. Terri Schell, a novice of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, poses with a chicken. She is director of the Shepherd's Corner Ecology Center, an ecological ministry the congregation runs in Blacklick, Ohio. (Courtesy of Kay Bodmer)

by Greta Gaffin

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Sr. Terri Schell, OP, is a second-year novice sister of the Dominican Sisters of Peace. In August, she began a new ministry as the director of the Shepherd's Corner Ecology Center, an ecological ministry the congregation founded in 1992 in Blacklick, Ohio.

She holds a bachelor's degree in environmental science and a minor in biology from University of North Carolina Wilmington and has extensive experience in environmental education and conservation.

Global Sisters Report asked Schell about her vision for the ecology center and how Catholics can approach ecology and their faith.

***GSR*: What made you interested in ecology and environmental justice?**

Schell: I've spent pretty much my whole adult life working with environmental education and care for creation. Originally, I got into it through a class in high school, and then, eventually, that deepened. I studied environmental education, environmental science and a minor in biology in college, and specifically, I was looking at the environmental education side.

All the while, that was pretty intertwined [with] how I live out my faith. Early on, I didn't have the words to necessarily show how they were intertwined.

But as I progressed in the professional world, I worked in aquariums and camps. I eventually worked for the church running an environmental education program and was able to finally live out and really dive more into the intersection between spirituality and environmental justice and education, and have fallen in love with that work.

That and *Laudato Si*', too, allowed me to live out my faith tangibly, [which] was a way to put some meat on it, and that had a tie to my entrance to religious life, too. So, a long, winding journey, but one basically beginning in high school.

Is there anything you hope to change or add at the ecology center?

It's important to me to honor what has been happening there for the past 34 years. It began in 1990, and a lot of good, necessary work has been done through Shepherd's Corner Ecology Center and through those who have worked in that

ministry and had a connection with that ministry. So I've been really inspired by the justice work that they've done, that caring for the land and supporting immigration populations in the area, and programming for kids and the immigrant population and the Latina and Latino populations.



Sr. Terri Schell, a second-year novice of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, at Mount Rainier in Washington state (Courtesy of Terri Schell)

I'm intrigued to carry that into the future and to see, at this point, what work is ours to do; looking at the needs of the times and our gifts that we hold at Shepherd's Corner, of the land and the staff and the animals that are all there, and to see and

explore that together. What that could possibly be, and to me, it would be a collaboration of us working together to see what those next steps will be.

I do see Shepherd's Corner as a place that offers another way of relating to Earth that is different from the dominant Western culture, and it invites us into a wider way of relating.

I see ways that has already gotten started, and one of those is a wetlands restoration project. It's 3 acres of agricultural land that are getting restored into natural wetland and prairie areas; it's just another opportunity for us to see a different way of relating to the earth. Before, it was seen as smelly and unproductive and gross to have wetlands, and a lot of them were drained by the settlers and by the farmers, including the ones on Shepherd's Corner's land. So now we're realizing what folks have known for a long time, [especially] Indigenous people, and that they are beautiful and engaging and healing places and provide amazing ecosystem services.

I see how this project is a way that we, as Dominican Sisters of Peace and community supporters, are honoring the land's inherent value — seeing it in a different way of relating to this land and not seeing usefulness to humans as its basis, but its usefulness to all of Earth's community. And it's this shift of how we might see and relate to the land. So I'm very excited about how that shift can take us into the future.

I think the other one that I'm excited about, which moves us into the future, is about racial and environmental healing, and relating differently to the land. My congregation, Dominican Sisters of Peace, started a process with Land Justice Futures. This is a program that's two years where we're exploring the intersection of climate resilience and racial justice.

So looking at our lands, how are we going to look at that intersection? Sisters have described it to be like a spiritual journey for our congregation to learn, heal and transform the ways that we're relating with the land. And we're asking questions like how we might proposition ourselves to be stewards of this land that lifts up the oppressed, or what might be a future that can bring about a more just relationship and possibly repair [the] harm that has been done, whether to people or the Earth.

It's just once again that wider way of relating. I see this healing and rich possibilities for justice and healing of everyone, not just the land, but also the folks that are on it.



Sr. Terri Schell, a second-year novice of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, plays guitar around a campfire. If people want to experience their faith through nature and engage with the land, the first step is to go outside, she says. (Courtesy of Kay Bodmer)

What advice would you give to people who want to experience their faith through nature and engage with the land?

Step 1, go outside.

Like any relationship, you're not going to build it if you don't put time into it, and so it's hard to honor and love and connect with the divine in creation if you don't spend any time in it. That can look very different wherever you are, but it's an invitation even to step outside those doors that we have. We spend most of our lives, as "United Statesians," indoors. It's an opportunity for us to just experience it and behold the beauty that's out there, or the green, or the liveness, and encounter the land and the earth and what there is.

So that's my favorite way — to get out there and sit with it and be with it. I think we also don't take the time often to slow down and allow those moments to happen. Setting yourself up for that opportunity, being out there, and then giving yourself the time in the space to really enjoy and savor what the divine is offering to you in this experience.

How do you see yourself as guiding younger generations toward an awareness of spirituality outside?

I was so surprised when I learned about Catholic social teaching and the idea that this intersection of nature and faith was ancient history and had a long tradition within the church. It has been extremely revealing to me to dive into that and experience it myself. So I was learning that there's a rich history in our Catholic faith of care for creation.

Then I worked at camps, and led others into that level of wonder and let other people, especially young people, know this isn’t separate. There's this fallacy that science and faith don’t work well together. This is who we are as Catholics, and it's natural to be able to see the divine within the beauty of ecology or the environment.

Caring for it is not a separate act; it is how we live out our faith as well. Inviting folks into experiences that tell them this isn't separate is so deeply intertwined. It's a message that I needed to hear. My generation and younger quite get it; they just needed to hear it packaged in a way like, "This is our faith, this is living out our faith."

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Do you have any advice for people who'd like to get involved with ecological justice or creation care work but are not sure where to start?

There are some great organizations that are Catholic-based that could be a steppingstone. Catholic Climate Covenant is an organization that is United States based, and they have chapters throughout the U.S. mostly based out of parishes. If you don't have one at your parish, they can connect you to the nearest local group.

Laudato Si' Movement is an international organization, and they have all kinds of resources. It's been helpful for me to be engaged with those organizations because this work is so large, and at the same time, it needs to be local. So it allows me to

have both of the groundwork support, and then also be connected with folks that are either national or worldwide, to see that it's happening everywhere, and to get the support that can be through all.