

Green pioneers, organized by a Dominican sister, transform a town

Sharon Abercrombie | Aug. 12, 2011 Eco Catholic

Nearly 1,000 households in the rural community of Springfield, Kentucky, have become earth healers. And they want the world passing by their doorsteps to know what they're up to.



So they've decorated their mailboxes with vibrantly colored decals announcing that we are proud to be a Green Pioneer Home.

Green Pioneers have pledged to incorporate eight simple, doable, sustainable living practices into their lives. The working list, which they sign onto, from a Web site, has 17 activities to choose from. People can recycle, use compact fluorescent bulbs and reusable shopping bags. They can grow some of their own food, use natural cleaning products, give their car a Sabbath day off once a week and stop buying bottled water. They can incorporate a prayer practice such as mindfulness, silent time, and meatless meals into their lives.

Sr. Claire McGowan, a Springfield, Ky, Dominican Sister of Peace, organized the mail box decal campaign last year. It is one of the latest projects the nun has instigated since 2005, the year she launched an environmental community organizing effort from a rented office in Springfield's City Hall.

"I felt called to do something to respond to the crisis of the Earth," she told me. Her desire reaches back to 1991, the year Dominican Sr. Miriam MacGillis, founding director of Genesis Farm in New Jersey, presented a three-day session on Earth literacy at a chapter meeting of the Springfield sisters. "It just blew our minds," said Sr. Claire.

At the time Sr. Claire, a former high school teacher and a counseling psychologist, was busy serving on her community's leadership team. But after MacGillis' presentation, Sr. Claire knew that when time allowed, she needed to add another line to her ministry resume. It would definitely include the word "Earth."

Her resolve came to pass. By 2004 she had graduated from an Earth Literacy master's degree program at St. Mary of the Woods College in Indiana and was eager to begin working for the planet.

Where could she best plant the seeds for this new ministry?

Springfield, Kentucky -- her religious community's hometown -- came to mind. "Only two percent of it was developed," she recalled. It hadn't yet succumbed to selling off land to real estate developers or abandoning family farms.

?So what if we could create a sustainable community to inspire other counties around us?? Sr. Claire wondered.

The first item on her list was to open an environmental outreach/educational center somewhere in Springfield. One of the people she contacted about finding rental space happened to be the mayor's brother. The next thing she knew, ?the mayor was calling me and asking for a meeting.?

When Mike Haydon learned what Sr. Claire had in mind, he offered her some office space in city hall. Oh, yes, and if she would organize a curbside city recycling program for the city of Springfield, he'd reduce the rent. Sr. Claire McGowan took him up on the offer.

Today, about half of the 1,150 households in Springfield participate. The (Washington) County Solid Waste department also runs a large regional recycling center, but it is independent of Sr. Claire's project. ?Of course we promote that it be used by county residents,? she said.

From that initial effort, the non-profit organization, New Pioneers for a Sustainable Future, emerged. The New Pioneers board consists of business, education and religious leaders in addition to local farmers. ?We wanted to have as broad a base as possible,? she explained.

New Pioneers is owned by the community of Springfield. The Preamble to the International Earth Charter serves as its guidepost. ?We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, at a time when humanity just choose its future?we must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded in respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.?

In their six and a half year history, Sr. Claire and the group have been busy. They sponsor lunchtime learning meetings, drawing upon the Northwest Institute's educational materials around such topics as food security and global warming. Study groups recently wound up an eight -week series on ?Menu for the Future.?

Sustainable communities study groups for local business and civic leaders exist, as well Earth Day celebrations, a downtown Farmer's Market ,?smart growth? and farmland preservation workshops, and occasional sustainability columns in the Springfield Sun.

In light of the smart growth and farmland preservation topics, New Pioneers created a video as a visioning tool for Springfield citizens. The video posed a question: What did people want their town to look like in 2025? With the help of the State Extension Office, New Pioneers compiled a questionnaire Some 650 people participated. Then New Pioneers organized a day of visioning, open to the public. Nearly 100 individuals showed up.

By the end of the day, a few people said that no one can make a living from farming, but by and large, the majority ?still want to be an agricultural community. They like their rural heritage.? Sr. Claire said.

To help further the rural heritage vision, New Pioneers has encouraged Springfielders to buy locally.

?If we could get people to spend just five percent of their food money on locally grown meats, fruit, honey and sorghum, instead of relying totally on the area's two supermarkets, that would go a long way to build a sustainable food system,? said the nun. To help promote this idea, New Pioneers has made a list available to residents with names and contact numbers of local farmers.

Sr. Claire's current projects are encouraging the schools, a local college, and three motherhouses (The Dominicans, Loretto, and Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Ky) in the vicinity of Washington County to buy local foods. ?We are currently in a monthly education process with our own motherhouse and college food service

directors about their buying locally grown food occasionally for special days. ?

Restaurants are also in New Pioneer's line of vision: The group is inviting eateries to offer one menu every week featuring locally-grown food.

?We always start small, with suggestions that are practical and doable.? said Sr. Claire. Why not big? Because ?local food is more expensive than what can be bought from large industrial food producers,? she explained.

Sr. Claire McGowan admits to wishing for more progress on the environmental sustainability front, but she acknowledges that one has to proceed slowly when it comes to changing people's minds and hearts. One example: She belongs to an interfaith group of ministers and priests. On paper, the group is pretty supportive of the concept of Earth care, but practically speaking, they are still ?focusing on the next world instead of this one.?

Her one bit of advice to groups looking to broaden Earth-centered views. ?Make it fun. Build relationships. Do small changes in small ways.?

In the "make it fun" category, Sr. Claire recently reached out to a group of fourth graders from a county school with a unique gardening moment. They were going to plant butterbeans, a popular Southern food staple.

Sr. Claire added some pizzazz to the session by reading a poem called ?The Butterbean Tent? by a famous local poet, Elizabeth Madox Roberts. ?She grew up and lived here in Springfield all her adult life. So we got an adult to build the frame, read the kids the poem and then had them plant the seeds. It was a good way of connecting our history, the earth, and encourage high aspirations in the kids as well.?

On a serious note, she offers this cautionary advice: Don't scare people about the dire state of the planet. Emphasize that they can do something positive. Because they can. And It all adds up. Look at the success of the Green Pioneers mailbox stickers, she points out.

Another encouraging piece: Those monthly sustainability newspaper columns, written by a local woman who is a long time environmental thinker ?are extremely well-received,? said Sr. Claire. ?If they're missing for a few weeks, people will always ask when they're coming again.?

Sr. Claire McGowan herself is a third positive case in point. ?When I first arrived people called me a tree hugger and ?that nun in City Hall.?? But hearts and attitudes can change. Last winter, the Springfield Chamber of Commerce named Sr. Claire McGowan as its ?Citizen of the Year.? One of her accomplishments? Helping to make Washington County ?Kentucky's Greenest Community.?

For further information about participating in Sr. Claire's Green Pioneer Homes project, go to: www.oppeace.org/green-pioneer-homes.

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