

Creation justice project helps Episcopal churches find efforts that are right for them

by [Melodie Woerman](#)

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Members of All Saints Episcopal Church in Hadley, Massachusetts, created a pollinator garden after taking part in An Episcopal Path to Creation Justice's pilot project. (Photo by Rachel Field)

A congregation that wants to be engaged in creation care has many things it can do—pollinator gardens, solar panels, energy audits, legislative advocacy, recycling, composting—but Rachel Field, part of the leadership team at [An Episcopal Path to Creation Justice](#), says that having so many options can make it hard, if not impossible, for a church to find the approach that is best for it.

The Path, as the project is known, completed a six-month pilot program earlier this year, which was made possible by a [\\$20,000 grant](#) in 2023 from the Episcopal Church's Task Force on Creation Care and Environmental Racism. Rather than provide the 12 participating churches with a list of environmentally friendly activities, they each were assigned a trained companion—someone other than their parish priest—who helped church members discern what they felt called to do.

The Path grew out of the grassroots [Creation Care Justice Network](#) in the Episcopal dioceses of Massachusetts and Western Massachusetts, and 10 of the pilot churches were in those two dioceses, with others from Connecticut and Maine.

Four pillars necessary for change and action were identified by that network: pray, learn, act, and advocate. Those pillars are foundational to the path, Field said, with each one including four steps within it—prepare, plant, grow, and harvest—that go steadily deeper.

But the key piece was finding companions who could walk with these pilot churches as they decided how and where they wanted to engage with creation care.

Field said she wasn't looking for experts—in fact, some of her first eight companions weren't very active in climate issues—but for people with group facilitation skills and the ability to help people connect with others in their community.

“Our core assumptions are that there are already people doing the work who are our neighbors, who might not be in the church, who have the information we need,” she said.

St. John's, Northampton, Massachusetts, in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts, was one of those pilot churches. It has been engaged in creation care for a long time, said Per Lofving, a longtime green advocate and member of the vestry, but the church gained something new by participating in the project.

“This took us to another level, where we learned to think more deeply about climate justice and how it fits into a spiritual community's actions and engagement,” he said.

Lofving was quick to note that spirituality wasn't lacking in the church's previous creation care efforts, but it now is undertaken more intentionally and with a view toward changing people's hearts.

“There are a lot of people doing good things [about climate change] and we should be doing those too, but our role within our church community and the larger community is to change hearts, not just of Episcopalians but of all people.”

They also have started reaching out more to students at nearby Smith College and people from the greater Northampton community. It also helped them identify the need to better center creation in their worship services, a feature they’re still working on, he said.

Mark Weiler, senior warden of another pilot parish—St. Mark’s in Southborough, in the Diocese of Massachusetts—learned about the program through Alex Chatfield, one of the path’s founders who also served as their companion. Having the four pillars helped them see how the church’s involvement could go steadily deeper in each area.

It’s easy to get overwhelmed when confronted with the reality of climate change, Weiler said, and taking part in this pilot has helped his church decide what they can do and when they can reasonably do it. “Don’t get stressed,” he advised others.

Field said the importance of a program like An Episcopal Path to Creation Justice can’t be underestimated. She has been involved in creation care work for 20 years, and laundry lists of ways to help the planet have been around for at least 40 years, she said. And during all that time, she said, “we haven’t stopped or altered the increase of carbon in the atmosphere.” In fact, it has [increased](#) from 315 parts per million in 1958 to 426 ppm in June 2024.

“It’s not an information problem we have, which means information is not going to be the solution,” Field said. “We need a total transformation of the heart. That requires that we slow down and learn how to be in right relationship with each other, which is why the companions, and moving at the speed of relationships, is at the heart of this project.” —Episcopal News Service