Episcopal Church's first eco-region hosts event for people to learn, reflect on environmental issues

by [Melodie Woerman](#)
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Williie Madl, left, and Ann Palmer point out rhubarb and strawberries growing at Bethany House and Gardens in Topeka, Kansas, on April 25 to some of the attendees of the Grasslands Eco-region Network gathering. Madl is groundskeeper for the gardens and Palmer helped design them. (Photo by Melodie Woerman/Episcopal News Service)

A gathering for people interested in creation care issues took place April 25-26 in Topeka, Kansas, and was sponsored by the Episcopal Grasslands Network, the first eco-region created by legislation passed during the 2024 general convention.

The event drew 134 registrants from 35 dioceses across the Episcopal Church, and about half of them attended in person. It also attracted 22 people who indicated they were not Episcopalians, including some who had no religious affiliation.

The Grasslands Network currently includes 12 Episcopal dioceses in the central and western United States—North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Western Kansas, Northwest Texas, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, Rio Grande, and Navajoland.

The creation of a second eco-region, named the East Coast Network, including the dioceses of Connecticut, Massachusetts, Western Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire, was announced during the event.

Kansas Bishop Cathleen Bascom said in an interview that she had the idea for these eco-region networks about a decade ago. That concept was strengthened by her work as dean of the Cathedral of St. Paul in Des Moines, Iowa, in 2008 when major flooding prompted the congregation to plant native plants and grasses on cathedral grounds to help absorb rainwater before it ran off into the storm sewer system.

Eco-regions were officially adopted at the 2024 Episcopal general convention. The adopted resolution said eco-region creation networks can be created when bishops of at least three dioceses describe to the presiding bishop their intention to form a network, designating one diocese to be the administrative center for the region.

Bascom said that while the process of establishing these networks is very bishop-centered, it does ensure there will be significant diocesan support for the effort. But, she added, creation care leaders in the region will play a major role in determining projects and identifying people in the region with expertise in the types of work the network wants to undertake.

The Center for Religion and Environment at the School of Theology at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, also will provide resources to help bishops and dioceses both create networks and implement nature-based climate solutions in their areas.

Group sessions during the Topeka event highlighted some of the ecological issues of concern to the Grasslands Network, including how people are adapting ranching practices to allow cattle to graze in a way that better mimics the way bison grazed on the tallgrass prairie before settlers moved west in the 19th century.

Sessions also looked at how people in urban areas are creating green spaces on their property and how churches are using the land on which they sit to serve their neighbors through nature and sometimes through gardens producing food.

David O'Hara and Raghav Sriram Yogeeswari from the Episcopal Diocese of South Dakota said they came to Topeka to see how other churches are caring for the lands they steward. Both are members of the [Church of the Good Shepherd](#) in Sioux Falls, where O'Hara's wife is the rector.

O'Hara also serves as the diocese's canon for creation and is a professor at [Augustana University](#) in Sioux Falls where Yogeeswari is a student. O'Hara said Yogeeswari, along with some faculty and other students, have recently been converting the campus into a food forest and a living laboratory that includes fruit trees, bee hives, and enough food to provide 40,000 meals a year.

O'Hara, meanwhile, is helping other South Dakota churches convert their grass lawns into vegetable gardens and a place to grow other food.

"If you want people to come in for bread and wine, give them food outside first," he said. "Use the land to raise food and restore the soil rather than worship grass that's non-native and that depletes our resources."

As the new diocesan missioner for the Episcopal Diocese of North Dakota, Ashley Hubbard said she came not only to learn what other churches and dioceses are doing but also to connect with them, as her diocese works to revive its creation care efforts. Many people in North Dakota are ranchers and farmers and couldn't get away to attend in-person—it's calving season and wheat-planting time, she said—so several were registered to attend online.

Phoebe Chatfield, associate for creation care and justice for the Episcopal Church, applauded the "fantastic mix of practitioners" who took part in the inaugural Grasslands Network event.

"They really have their hands in the dirt in a number of different ways, whether this is actively managing and transforming church lands, people who are directly engaged with ranching and sustainable agriculture, or people who are really hands-on in the work of creation care in other ways."

She added, "It's also a pretty remarkable collaborative effort between people from 12 different Episcopal dioceses, and it's pretty remarkable to see so many dioceses collaborating in that way."

In addition to the group sessions at Grace Cathedral, in-person participants also broke into affinity groups for discussions with people with similar concerns: church lands and urban gardens; nature restoration, preservation and wildlife; smaller farmers and ranchers; and larger farmers and ranchers.

They also had the opportunity to tour [Bethany House and Gardens](), an initiative of Bascom's that created spaces on diocesan grounds for pollinator and culinary gardens, native prairie grasses, and an outdoor chapel dedicated to an historically Black church in Topeka, St. Simon's, which was closed in 1964. —Episcopal News Service