

# Center for Religion and Environment

Winter 2020



Exploring the woods has a very different feel as fall gives way to winter. The bare trees no longer identify themselves by leaf or bloom. Now it is the texture and pattern of bark and roots that readily reveal the trees' names and tell their stories. The shagbark hickory's distinctive fringe is more visible now while the lightning-scarred oak shows the marks of its resistance against a summer storm. Like a cozy fireside chat with family or friends, visiting the forest in winter invites intimacy and companionship, the chance to see plants and creatures from a different perspective, to learn the stories with the names.

Whether in the Garden of Eden or in the intimacy of our own homes, we humans have a penchant for naming things. As Robin Wall Kimmerer reminds us in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, names are the way we enter into relationships with all living things. We crave connection, not only with other people but with the world around us, and until we know the names of people, places, and the other creatures living there, we feel isolated and alone. The act of naming and sharing those names builds community, creates homes and signals belonging.

In September, the Center for Religion and Environment partnered with the Beecken Center in the School of Theology to host our first annual

## Newsletter Editorial

"Names are the way we humans build relationship, not only with each other but with the living world. I'm trying to imagine what it would be like going through life not knowing the names of the plants and animals around you."

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

conference, *Deep Green Faith: Holy Forest Kinship*. Together we explored manifestations of kinship with non-human creation and what about our relationship with creation makes this kinship holy. We learned about the latest scientific evidence revealing how trees live in community with one another, share nutrients and information through their roots, and can distinguish members of their own species. I left the conference with a renewed commitment to learn the names of the trees and other forest creatures I encounter but do not yet know.

As CRE executive director Robin Gottfried shares in his "Notes from the Center," the CRE community has grown through a desire for connection. The programs and support CRE offers students, lay people and faith communities have evolved out of a desire to help others notice and connect with the world around them. In this issue of the newsletter we share reflections from conference participants on *Holy Forest Kinship*, learn about Sewanee senior Sarah Convington's summer internship at a children's home in Spokane, Washington, and hear from participants in the *Deep Green Church* presentations CRE offered to several church and university groups in Normal, Illinois.

Both the silence of nature contemplation and engaging conversations around re-imagining the nature of our faith communities begin with a desire for deeper, more meaningful relationships. Whether it is through our Certificate Program in Contemplation and Care for Creation, a retreat, conference or workshop, we invite you to connect with us as we explore questions, share stories and learn each other's names.

Mary Foster  
Editor

# From the Center—On Connections

Robin Gottfried, executive director of the Center for Religion and Environment



According to Ronald Rolheiser, O.M.I., over the last several centuries the western world has encountered greater and greater difficulty experiencing a felt presence of God. Simultaneously, the increasing urbanization of humanity and technological change has led many of us to experience nature mainly through The Nature Channel. More and more we experience the divine and the rest of creation from our armchairs. Now with the advent of social media and texting, the same seems to be happening in our relationships with one another.

My experience over the last twenty years is that people are hungry for connection—with God, themselves, nature and other humans. Our culture and thinking encourage us to extreme individualism, which unfortunately does little to foster the connectedness for which we yearn. So at Center events we offer opportunities for people to reconnect with God, nature, and others both in mind and spirit. The results never cease to amaze me. People smile and often don't want to leave. They want more. They find themselves refreshed and their faith deepened. This certainly

was the case with our conference and our visit in Normal, Illinois.

In a world that promotes individualism at the expense of the common good, commodifies nature, and all too often objectifies other humans, we have lost track of how things are connected and how restoring and fostering these connections make us whole and holy. Our view of reality reinforces our isolation. As the apostle Paul once said, we desperately need a renewal of our minds. Those of us who live in Sewanee are fortunate in that we live in a liberal arts-informed culture that promotes exploring how things relate to one another. By virtue of our intellectual DNA we believe that all forms of knowledge and faith have much to say to one another and that the world consists of interconnected systems. So, the Center emphasizes relatedness and relating in all we do and offer to others. This is true in our theology as well as in our embrace of knowledge wherever it may be found.

Once again, the response to our thoughts surprises and encourages us—the art students at Illinois State that hung around after class to talk

with us and each other, the audience that stayed late (for me!) into the evening after our evening talk at Normal Methodist, the evaluations from the conference that expressed a deep hunger for understanding and relationships.

To Christians our message should be no surprise. After all, they profess a God who is a system of three persons relating to one another so intimately that they act as one. They believe that this community created all things, so that the importance of the relationships they see in the world in some way reflects the very dynamic of their God. For them God's presence permeates all things, revealing God in the things God has made (see, e.g., Rom 1:18–20). Yet all too often we Christians have lost sight of this reality. With most religions Christians share this understanding that the divine/sacred/Holy/One/Spirit somehow reveals itself through all of creation. Together the broad community of faith shares a conviction that the sacred is actively present in the world.



# Inaugural Deep Green Faith Conference a Success

Sheri Kling, Executive Director of the Beecken Center and Associate Dean of the School of Theology, University of the South

The inaugural Deep Green Faith Conference, co-hosted by the Beecken Center and the Center for Religion and Environment (CRE) at the University of the South was a success, with over 60 attendees from 21 states throughout the U.S. The Beecken Center's work is focused on faith, learning, and ministry, and the Center for Religion and Environment takes an interdisciplinary and pluralistic approach to spirituality of nature, eco-theology, and environmental ethics. Deep Green Faith grew naturally out of such nutritious soil. The conference was held on the university's campus—a certified Tennessee arborum, with more than 120 different species of trees on the Domain.

Deep Green Faith: Holy Forest Kinship opened with a presentation on Friday, Sept. 6, by Dr. Matthew Sleeth from his book *Reforesting Faith*. Dr. Sleeth talked about the relationship between faith and forests and

the significance of trees in scripture. Events on Saturday, Sept. 7, included a plenary talk by forestry professor Karen Kuers on “Forest Community: The Social Network of Trees” and a panel discussion featuring professors John Gatta and Collin Cornell, as well as Sheri D. Kling, Ph.D., executive director of the Beecken Center, and Robin Gottfried, Ph.D., executive director of CRE. Participants in the two-day event were encouraged to “wonder and wander together” not only through presentations and discussion, but also through contemplative practice among the trees.

According to Dr. Sleeth, “The Bible talks about trees more than any living creation other than people. When we subtract trees from Scripture, we miss lessons of faith necessary for our growth.” Given that new ecological research reveals astonishing levels of communication happening beneath the bark of our

forest-based neighbors, we explored what science tells us about the nature of forests, their multi-dimensional impacts on humans, and our own relationships with each other and with the ecosystems within which we live. Attendees were inspired to go even deeper, responding to Kling's question, “How might a more soulful view of the web of creation affect not only the choices we make but the way we view our non-human kin?”

The conference closed with a liturgical ceremony featuring inspirational readings, meditation stations focusing on ecological themes, and original music by Kling. Organizers are already planning another conference Oct. 23–25, 2020, that will explore how to maintain hope in a time of ecological crisis. To learn about future events and sign up for event-related communication, visit [beeckencenter.sewanee.edu](http://beeckencenter.sewanee.edu).



# Conference Participants Share Their Experience

## Laura Snow Hawkins

When we walked into the Gailor Hall Auditorium on Friday evening, I noticed the beautiful paintings of forest landscapes, flowers and trees that surrounded the room. The event I had been waiting for was beginning to unfold before me. Dr. Sheri Kling opened with a question: Why is it that we have separated God and environment? She went on to touch on how we needed to go beyond dualistic consciousness ...the interrelatedness of economies, quantum physics ...Wow! I have been reading about changing our dualistic thinking, and how to apply non-dualistic thinking to the issues of climate change and sustainable growth in my community. This is starting out good.

I took Dr. Robin Gottfried's suggestion to treat this conference as a retreat. I wanted to get away, to be with like minds and to learn, to hear the stories of others. Most of all, unlike most of the conferences on the environment that I have attended in the past, I would have the opportunity to pray and to be free to thank God, the Creator of this beautiful place and the amazing landscape of mountains, plateaus and rivers that I had traveled to the University of the South.

The keynote speaker Dr. Matthew Sleeth, M.D., was entertaining, informative and quite the humorist in his presentation from his latest book, *Reforesting Faith*. He took us through the fascinating journey of how he got involved with the environment. This first session was an enlightening blend

of scripture, theology and history of how we have separated our religion and relationship with God, ourselves and nature. So ended the first day, and it was good.

The second plenary session featured Dr. Karen Kuers who spoke on Forest Community: The Social Network of Trees. This presentation spoke to my inner geeky budding biologist. Dr. Kuers explained how there is a network in the forest that allows trees to communicate. I took a great deal of notes to discuss with our local park naturalist and to do further research. The Q&A with Dr. Kuers and Fr. Jerry Cappel was informative and helped me to understand the interrelationship between God and science.

Next, I participated in forest bathing with Connie Keetle (who I later found out was the artist of all the beautiful paintings in Gailor Hall Auditorium). This was my first forest bathing experience, and it was very soulful and touching. I wanted to check it out because I have inquired about getting certified as a Forest Therapy Guide. I learned how to connect myself much deeper and to use all my senses when in the woods. My only regret is that I would have loved to be able to do both the Forest Bathing and Living in an Icon Contemplation.

The panel discussion (plenary session #3) was so informative that I didn't want it to end! Collin Cornell, John Gatta, Sheri Kling and Robin Gottfried as moderator held my attention captive and my pen busy taking notes. The connections and the kinship of God, human beings and nature were brought into better focus with our literature, scripture, theology and philosophy.

So ended the second day, and it was even better.

The closing ceremony touched me body and soul—the sweet music, being taken away with the opportunity to touch, smell, taste, and the beauty of each display around the room. Being with each other, praying, communing and lifting our prayers to God the creator was so touching. The magic, the mystery that feeling of being together in worship with others who care so deeply about the earth, its people and all that inhabit it—this was, for me, my little moment of heaven here on earth.

*Laura Snow Hawkins works with the park staff of Paris Mountain State Park in Greenville, South Carolina, and as a*



*hiking leader and student mentor for OLLI at Furman University. She is a member of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Greenville where she serves as coordinator for Holy Hikes Upper South Carolina and as an EFM mentor. She lives in Travelers Rest, South Carolina, with the love of her life, Randy Hawkins.*

## Danny Whitehead

The Deep Green Faith: Holy Forest Kinship Conference was like a cool glass of water on a hot summer day. It provided me an opportunity to meet, interact, and learn with and from like-minded individuals who also care for all the Creator has made. Presenters captured my imagination by successfully blending Scripture,



theology and science. The focus on trees encouraged us to realize that everything that God has made is interconnected and interdependent. We were reminded that as co-creators we have a responsibility to nurture and care for all living things rather than seeing them as simply natural resources. I was especially intrigued by the concept that plants have memory, reinforcing

the belief that we are all one. I also appreciated the chance to begin seeing trees as icons. This was my first visit to Sewanee and I was awed by its beauty. The weekend motivated me to apply for the next Certificate in Contemplation and Care for Creation cohort.

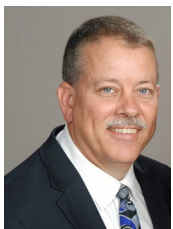
*Whitehead of Florence, Alabama, is the rector of St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in Florence and the facilitator for the Tennessee*

*Valley chapter of Holy Hikes. He also chairs the Task Force for Stewardship of Creation Episcopal for the Diocese of Alabama.*



## Diving Into Deep Green Faith: CRE Faculty Lead Workshops in Illinois

The Rev. Dr. Kent King-Nobles, Pastor at Normal First United Methodist Church



In September, Robin Gottfried and Jerry Cappel had a busy two days in the twin cities of Bloomington-Normal, Illinois.

On Sunday morning, Jerry preached in two worship services at the First United Methodist Church. At the same time, Robin led conversations with youth, then adults. Sunday afternoon included reflections at an art display featuring native prairie grasses, followed by guided contemplation at the Illinois State University Horticulture Center.

Monday morning started with a special event to help area religious leaders think more about what it means to lead a faith community in creation stewardship. Then that afternoon Robin and Jerry visited an Illinois State University art class and helped the students reflect on how to observe nature and see the world more openly. That evening, Robin addressed a community crowd.

In all of these conversations, Robin and Jerry challenged us to

see creation care as an essential part of faith, and not a side interest. We were invited to see the entire creation as part of God's plan for redemption, and to think of salvation as including the entire earth.

Without intending it, some of the ways that we lead worship are anti-Creation. Some of our liturgy, hymns and prayers are actually working against our care for God's creation. Without being aware, our narrow focus on the individual and the human community take us away from a biblical approach to creation and from discipleship in Jesus. These were some of the challenging words Jerry and Robin offered to a group of faith leaders who came to think about how to lead our communities in creation stewardship. Some of these challenges to our normal ways of doing things were not easily accepted and led to deep conversations. The participants left the event grateful for

the time and determined to continue reflecting on how to better lead.

Participants in all of the events appreciated the help in thinking more theologically about what some have framed the "environmental crisis." Some have expressed interest in going farther by working through the book recently published by Robin and Jerry [ed. note: *Living in an Icon: A Program for Growing Closer to Creation and to God*]. Jerry and Robin were hosted by the Religion, Culture and the Arts Endowment of the First United Methodist Church of Normal. We recommend Robin and Jerry to other communities who are looking for ways to go deeper in creation stewardship.



# Viewing Art Through a Deep Green Lens

Tony Crowley, Illinois State University Professor of Art



As one might expect when a group of students are introduced to visitors, shyness ruled at first. Robin's experience and skill as a teacher was evident in the way he shared a number of relevant quotations with the students and asked them questions that encouraged them to focus on the meaning of each and interpret the messages in the quotations in their own words. That got the ball rolling. Jerry read a vivid passage from one of Annie Dillard's books that dovetailed nicely with Robin's RA RAH mnemonic—Reorient, Attend, Respect, Appreciate, Honor. That led to a discussion of the relationship of that concept to the creative process—awareness, focus, working stage, evaluation, revision. The session concluded with an informal interaction among Robin, Jerry, and the students in which the artworks that the students produced in preparation for the visit were explained and discussed in a noisy, enthusiastic, and energetic exchange. The event, originally planned to be 20 or 30 minutes long naturally and organically blossomed into a 90-minute interchange that benefited all concerned.

## Making Connections at The Hutton School: One Sewanee Student's Internship

For Sewanee senior Sarah Covington, a summer internship in the Pacific Northwest allowed her to explore not only future career possibilities but a new environment as well. A psychology and classics major, Covington was looking for an opportunity that would combine her experience in facilitating summer camp programs with her interest in helping children. At Hutton Settlement in Spokane, Washington, she found what she was seeking.

Situated on 319 pristine acres, the landscape and architecture of the historic Hutton Settlement in Spokane, Washington evoke images of a bygone era. The 100-year-old property serves as an alternative home for children between the ages of five and 18. Hutton director David Milliken says that most of the children who come to Hutton have experienced some form of trauma, so offering opportunities for healing and developing stable relationships is a core component of campus life.

Designed as an eco-literacy internship, Covington's summer at Hutton centered on helping children heal from trauma by connecting with nature. In addition to assisting the staff with their regular summer programs, Covington also had the opportunity to tap her own interests and skills to connect teens with the world around them. Teaching students how to frame a photograph, for example, she provided

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another way for them to engage creation and see their surroundings from a fresh perspective.

Although Hutton is a non-sectarian facility, Milliken, a CRE Advisory Board member and graduate of the Contemplation and Care for Creation program, says that the spiritual connection with creation is an essential element of their programs. “Kids in trauma see the world as hostile, threatening and untrustworthy, see themselves as bad, and feel that they are alone.” While the Hutton staff use traditional psychological treatment methods to help their residents heal, a key component to the healing process is finding the deep goodness within themselves and in the world, Milliken explains. “In the garden they learn how everything is connected; they see they are created for something special. They begin to say, ‘If that worm has a special purpose in this world, then maybe I do, too.’ So I see this as spiritual work in that we are exposing them to trees and bees and rivers and plants very intentionally to help create a larger sense of belonging in this world. That’s spiritual work.”

In addition to facilitating programs for the residents, Covington worked alongside Tamara Milliken to create infused oils and salves from herbs growing in the campus garden and foraged from the surrounding woods and meadows. Through this process Covington, an Oklahoma native, said she, along with the teens, learned the names of unfamiliar plants. “I enjoyed getting to teach something I already knew about but also getting to learn with the kids about plants,” Covington said. She says she now tries to identify the plants she encounters on the Sewanee campus.

Milliken says he believes learning the names of plants and creatures is an essential element of caring for creation and developing a relationship with one’s surroundings. “Everything in nature is unique and valuable. Every little thing has a name. That bird has personhood. It starts with naming it. And the kids at Hutton learn the names of things and then begin to value them all.”

Covington especially enjoyed the last five days of her internship when she helped chaperone a trip

to Glacier National Park. “I got to learn about a place I had never been before,” she said. “I love hiking and camping and enjoyed exploring that with them.”

“I think after working at Hutton I realized I like working with kids in general,” Covington added. “Before that I worked mostly with younger kids. At Hutton most of the kids I worked with were late middle school and high school age, and I really enjoyed that.”

Covington will graduate from Sewanee in May. Before applying to graduate school, however, she says she plans to spend a couple of years working with an organization that will allow her to use the skills she has developed through her internship at Hutton as well as her volunteer work with Blue Monarch in Monteagle, a residential home for women recovering from addiction and their children.



## MA/RE Program reaches record enrollment

The School of Theology's Master of Arts in Religion and Environment (MA/RE) program has been flourishing recently. The program, which allows students to take courses at the seminary and environmental studies courses at the college, currently has six students enrolled. The students represent a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives: Roman Catholic, Methodist, and Episcopalian, drawn from across the United States and as far away as Mozambique. Their educational backgrounds are equally diverse, ranging from eastern philosophy and religious studies to chemistry, biology, and urban ecology.

The MA/RE program builds on Sewanee's distinctive strengths, including its world-class environmental studies program, one of the nation's top Episcopal seminaries, and its 13,000-acre domain.

"Learning for me begins the moment we leave the classroom," explains MA/RE student Allen Doyle. "There is a rich and diverse abundance of persons, land-uses, ecosystems, and communities on this plateau, each with its own unique identity and story. The MA/RE program has allowed me to become immersed in these places, working on projects such as restorative agriculture, behavior ecology, and contemplative prayer."

Faculty, too, appreciate the interdisciplinary nature of the program. "Religion and Environment students bring a unique and valuable perspective to whatever classes they're in, whether it's Systematic Theology, Environmental Ethics, or Bible," said Andrew Thompson, the faculty advisor for the program. "And I constantly hear from colleagues at the college how much they value the students' unique insights as well."

For more information on the MA/RE program, please visit the program website:

[theology.sewanee.edu/master-of-arts/academics/concentrations](https://theology.sewanee.edu/master-of-arts/academics/concentrations)

## Spaces Available for Contemplation and Care for Creation 2020

Do you relish the idea of exploring with others the ecology of the interaction of Christian faith and spirituality with environmental consciousness? Do you seek a deeper, more theologically grounded understanding of how the Christian faith can inform the practice of creation care? Do you long to grow spiritually through the practice of nature contemplation and learn how to facilitate this practice for others? If so, then the non-credit Certificate Program in Contemplation and Care for Creation may be what you are seeking.

Led by Robin Gottfried, center director and professor emeritus of economics, and the Rev. Jerry Cappel, environmental coordinator of Province IV of the Episcopal Church, this ecumenical program is open to both lay and ordained persons from all parts of the Christian family. The year-long journey begins May 21, 2020, with a six-day residency on a scenic historic wooded bluff overlooking Lost Cove in Sewanee. Participants will continue their study through monthly online meetings and by exploring the spiritual practices introduced in *Living in an Icon*. In addition, each participant will implement a small project applying what they have learned in the residency. Throughout the program, participants will encounter the sacred in nature, interpret that experience, and reflect on its implication for their own lives and how to share with others practical measures of earth care. The program will conclude with a two to three-day retreat in Sewanee in early May 2021.

For more information or to apply, please visit our website at [new.sewanee.edu/cre/cc](https://new.sewanee.edu/cre/cc).



## News and Notes



During the spring semester 2020, Judith Marklin, a first year student in the School of Theology's masters program in religion and environment will start serving as the Center for Religion and Environment's (and possibly the nation's) first eco-chaplain. With funding from the School's program in community engagement she will network with existing environmental and religious organizations, both graduate and undergraduate, to bring the spiritual dimension of creation into campus discussions and activities, as well as to offer some programming unique to her role. Look for more on this in the summer newsletter.

Our next Deep Green Faith conference will be next October 23–25. Focusing on how faithful people can maintain hope while facing seemingly insurmountable environmental catastrophes, the conference will feature keynote Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, Episcopal priest, author, retreat leader, climate activist, and Missioner for Creation Care for both the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts and Southern New England Conference, United Church of Christ. Hold the date!

You now can watch a short video about CRE on Vimeo: ([vimeo.com/383560040](https://vimeo.com/383560040)).