

Working with Religious Communities To Protect Their Land

by Kathy McGrath

In a state where Mass Audubon calculates that 40 acres of open space are lost to development each day, the existence of a large group of properties of great conservation value could be viewed as something of a miracle. Miraculous or not, the existence of such properties, owned by religious communities, is an often overlooked fact. It may be that lands owned by religious communities constitute one of the single greatest sources of undeveloped, unprotected open space still available in this area. But just how many of these properties are there? How can their owners be identified and approached? And most importantly, would the owners be sympathetic to land preservation?

Several years ago Bernie McHugh, coordinator of the Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition, set out to answer these questions. McHugh recalls, "Joel Lerner, director of the Massachusetts Division of Conservation Services for over 30 years, asked me if I knew how much open land belonged to religious organizations in the Commonwealth. I said I had no idea. He said, 'neither do I; go find out.'"

The answers were not easily found, until McHugh met Chris Loughlin, a Dominican Sister and director of the Crystal Spring Center for Earth Learning. The center is located on 40 acres of former farmland, a gift to the Sisters from a grateful donor. Loughlin has taken on as her mission educating others "to see land as a community to which we belong, and to develop a way of participating in that community which reflects and honors the interconnectedness of all things." Loughlin and the other Sisters at the center were hoping to conserve the property, then in use as a community-supported garden.

Loughlin describes her goals: "As we seek to redefine our purpose and work in the 21st century, the challenge is to recognize the devastation of the Earth that has occurred from our worldview of separation from living systems. Now we

become *earth literate*, and commit ourselves to participate with others in the great recovery."

So the Religious Lands Conservancy (RLC) project was formed, combining the skills and resources of each partner. The Mass Land Trust Coalition would provide information on conservation and access to land trusts; the Crystal Spring Center would provide insight into the spiritual basis for conservation and introductions to many religious communities.

The partners sought to bridge the gap they saw between the two sides of this equation. The wholly secular conservation groups have little experience working with religious communities to conserve land. Financial incentives in the form of tax benefits, available to the average landowner considering conserving his or her property, are not available to



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the nonprofit religious groups. Some religious communities may view conservationists as another arm of the secular world they'd rather not engage with. And many conservationists, believing that the lands held by religious institutions are in stable, enduring ownership, do not see the urgency to conserve them. This may have been true in the past, but as the finances of many religious communities become

strained, this valuable land may be viewed as a community's greatest financial asset and sold to the highest bidder. Unless these communities can be reached and made aware that there are viable conservation alternatives, the open space they own is likely to end up in the hands of developers.

The Special Nature of Religious Lands

Remote convents and monasteries; schools, hospitals and orphanages in pristine natural settings; waterfront summer camps; retreat houses amidst acres of forest; working farms and large tracts of woodland—these are just some of the sites Religious Lands Conservancy has sought out. Typically these lands are large parcels held intact for long periods and carefully stewarded. They often contain undisturbed wildlife habitat or agricultural land farmed for many years with low-impact practices.

You wouldn't expect to find such a gem in the suburb of Westborough, a town located at the crossroads of major transportation networks and trying to maintain a balance between fast-paced urban life and suburban residential areas. But a local parish church, St. Luke's, holds 120 acres on the edge of the highly valued water resource area of Cedar Swamp. This property, in an area designated by the state as "of critical environmental concern," provides prime habitat for a diverse population of birds and wildlife and has also been home to a community-supported garden (CSA) for the past 10 years. The Pastor, Fr. George Lange, talks about the wonder of walking the property through the changing seasons, and of the birds he has seen. The current CSA farmer, in place for seven years, speaks of his commitment to environmentally sound, community-oriented farming and of his gratitude to Fr. George and the St. Luke's community for allowing him to construct his vision of an organically farmed, diverse, old-fashioned market garden.

St. Luke's, while unusual as a parish property, is not unique when you consider properties owned by some religious orders. At this time RLC is in conversation with three Catholic women's orders actively farming their land and seeking ways to ensure that this work continues.

At the other end of the spectrum are sites like the National Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette in the City of Attleboro, once an important textile center in the Providence-New Bedford metro area. On the grounds of a former sanatorium, the Shrine and Retreat Center actually cover little of the 170-acre property. The remaining acreage has been untouched for years, allowing a matrix of upland and wetland habitat to recover. The La Salette Fathers, whose mission of reconciliation has a human focus, wish to extend that mission to foster healing between the human and the natural world. Their dream is to create a spiritual garden and trails through this wild property, to provide visitors a place to experience healing with the natural environment, and to foster education about, and respect for, the natural world.

In the three years since Religious Lands Conservancy was formed, the partners have explored conservation alternatives with several dozen religious communities. Although the project's focus is Massachusetts, they have responded to

A Quiet Microcosm

With three miles of river frontage situated just 20 miles north of the Charleston peninsula and squarely within the Cooper River Historic District, Mepkin Plantation would be in imminent threat of development but for the Trappist community that calls it home. On August 12, the Mepkin Abbey community—which traces its origins to the monastic movement of the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. in Egypt, Palestine and Syria—voted to forever protect its 3,128-acre home in Berkeley County, SC, as "a place to find the Lord God."

The *Mepkin Abbey Land Management Policies* lists these objectives:

1. To preserve our land as a place conducive to quiet, meditative walks, bicycle rides and sacred reading and renewal for the brothers;
2. A place where wildlife, fauna and flora, may find a home; we are sensitive to the demands of ecology;
3. A place where non-community members may enjoy God's creation and recreate with family and friends or spend a few days here in spiritual retreat;
4. A place where visitors may come to learn something about the history of this place and the heritage of the Cooper River Historic District;
5. As a source of income for the operation of the Abbey.

Excellent stewards of the land since receiving it as a donation from Henry and Clare Luce in 1949, the Mepkin Abbey community decided to permanently protect its primary asset when MeadWestvaco offered up for sale an adjoining 10,697-acre tract in 2002. Led by Abbot Francis Kline, the rest of the Mepkin Abbey community partnered with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, The Conservation Fund, Ducks Unlimited, the Lowcountry Open Land Trust, and The Nature Conservancy to set about protecting the 30,000-acre Cooper River Historic District with funding from a North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant, a Recovery Land Acquisition Grant, and a grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

By pledging a conservation easement to Ducks Unlimited, Mepkin Abbey helped leverage another 18,700 protected acres, and the easement's culmination in August means that over two-thirds of the Cooper River Historic District is now permanently preserved. With over 3,100 acres, Mepkin Plantation is significant in its own right—as a home to federally protected red-cockaded woodpeckers and bald eagles, 726 species of plants, and significant historical landmarks. As botanist and author Richard Porcher has written, "Mepkin Plantation is a microcosm, somewhat suspended in time, of the Carolina Lowcountry."

—*Badge Humphries, Ducks Unlimited*

calls from as far away as Ruma, Ohio and Wichita, Kansas. The level of interest from religious communities seeking to find the means to realize some form of land preservation has been remarkable.

And interest from the conservation community appears to be growing. Will Rogers, president of The Trust for Public Land noted, "Church-owned properties, when they come on

“The Land Belongs to All of Us”

Back in 1999 the Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict donated a conservation easement to the Minnesota Land Trust (MLT) on 26 acres of woodlands and farmland near their convent in St. Cloud. The deal took five years to complete because of the number of people required to approve the project, plus the time involved in creating a park with the City of St. Cloud. But patience paid off.

The 26 acres is part of a larger parcel the Order sold to the adjacent St. Benedict’s Center after donating the easement to the land trust and giving six acres to the city for a park. The park contains trails for walking and cross-country skiing.

The project grew out of contact the Sisters had with MLT in the early 1990s, when a representative from the newly formed land trust was in the St. Cloud area promoting the organization’s work and the Sisters offered to host MLT meetings at the monastery in St. Joseph. A partnership was born out of mutual respect for the land.

At the time of the gift, Sister Phyllis Plantenberg said, “The land doesn’t belong to any of us, it belongs to all of us. It’s a gift to us and the people who come after us.”

Donating the conservation easement on the woodlands before selling them was a top priority for the monastery. The protected lands overlook part of the Mississippi River and contain natural wetlands, oaks more than 100 years old and farmland. Plantenberg calls it “a wonderful oasis in the midst of development; a place to meditate, listen to the birds, or watch a farmer at work in his field. It’s a place to fill your inner needs.”

the market, tend to be treasures. Church land is often the last remaining property of its kind in a community.”

Evolution of Religious Thought on Conservation

The publication of “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis” by Lynn White, Jr. in 1967 sparked debate about the role of religious and moral principles in our attitude toward the environment. White stated, “What people do about their ecology . . . is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion.” White contended that Christian religions have historically sanctioned a blatant disregard for the environment.

Since that time, religious environmental ethics, eco-theology, and eco-justice have won increasingly broad acceptance in religious communities. In the summer of 1987 the first North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology was held in Indiana. The following year, prominent eco-theologian Thomas Berry published his seminal work on the subject, *Dream of the Earth*. Berry identifies the “Great Work” of our time as establishing a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship in all our endeavors and institutions.

In 1993, Calvin De Witt co-founded the Evangelical Environmental Network. De Witt, a professor of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, also became Director of the Au Sable Institute for Environmental Studies,

a Christian environmental stewardship institute in Michigan. De Witt’s belief is that care for the Earth is mandated in the Christian Bible. His group is itself a member of a larger coalition called the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, which also includes the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the National Council of Churches U.S.A.

In 1998, the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University began sponsoring a series of conferences on Religions of the World and Ecology. Drawing from many countries and religious traditions, the conferences arose out of a growing concern for the urgent problems affecting the planet worldwide: “. . . the essential ingredients for human survival, especially water supplies and agricultural land, are being threatened across the planet by population and consumption pressures, . . . the widespread destruction of species and the unrelenting loss of habitat continue to accelerate. One of the greatest challenges to contemporary religions, then, is how to respond to the environmental crisis.”

These theories are increasingly incorporated into the practical daily lives of many religious communities. There is a trend among Catholic Women’s orders in particular to convert the lands that once served as novitiates, mother houses and schools into organic farms and ecological learning centers. One of the first is Genesis Farm in New Jersey, under the direction of Miriam MacGillis, teacher, artist, Dominican Sister and most specially, farmer. “Genesis Farm is a center for Earth studies and site of a community-supported biodynamic garden. It focuses on the connections between the health of our global commons of air, water, land, nature, and the health of our local communities and bioregions. It is rooted in a spirituality that reverences Earth as a primary revelation of the divine.”

A number of orders have created and adopted land ethics as part of their mission statements. Others are aware of the importance of reverence for the land to their missions, but haven’t developed a coherent expression for it. RLC’s first goal is to assist in this focusing of the theoretical into the practical, to provide education in the spiritual basis that inspires preservation.

“Our involvement with some communities begins with basic education about the importance of conservation and the connection between spiritual mission and land,” says Loughlin. Frequently she is asked by a small group of ecologically concerned members to help spread their concerns to the rest of the community. In the case of the National Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette, Loughlin will prepare supporting documents for the order’s chapter meeting, a gathering of members from across the country to consider the concerns of the entire organization. An affirmation at this meeting would allow the Attleboro group to pursue preservation. It is the group’s hope that their vision is compelling enough to win that affirmation, and that their actions will reflect Thomas Berry’s conclusion, “All human institutions, professions, programs and activities must now be judged by the extent to which they . . . foster a human and Earth relationship.”

With other communities, Religious Lands Conservancy’s

primary focus is finding the right organization to be the community's conservation partner. St. Luke's parish, for example, is in the forefront of religious thinking on environmental issues, and has an established Land Stewardship Committee. Rosemary Johnson, former chair, describes being inspired by "Renewing the Earth," a statement of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1991 which begins, "At its core, the environmental crisis is a moral challenge. It calls us to examine how we use and share the goods of the Earth, what we pass on to future generations, and how we live in harmony with God's creation." It is through the efforts of the Land Stewardship Committee and the supportive pastor that the parish received permission from the diocese to pursue conservation. RLC initiated meetings between a regional land trust, Sudbury Valley Trustees, and this committee. Now, discussions to draft a conservation easement are in progress.

Values: A Common Ground

"We seem ultimately always thrown back on individual ethics as the basis of conservation policy. It is hard to make a man, by pressure of law or money, do a thing which does not spring naturally from his own personal sense of right and wrong." Aldo Leopold, considered by many to be the father of wildlife ecology, made this statement in 1937. And it seems equally true today.

As William Cronon of the University of Wisconsin-Madison noted in his keynote address at the National Land Conservation Conference in 2005, "The work of land conservation is not just about protecting material nature—plants, animals and ecosystems—but also about protecting human values and cultural landscapes."

The language may differ, but conservationists share these values with religious communities seeking to preserve "God's creation." These common values can form the basis of understanding to shape the relationship between conservationists and religious communities as they share the mission of preserving land.

For the future, there is a need to continue to broaden the notion of social equity, and to challenge the traditional view that land is merely an asset of the religious community that can (and should) be converted into cash in furtherance of the community's mission. As more and more religious groups embrace salvation of the land as part of their mission, the concept of social equity comes to include the intrinsic value of the land itself. In this way, the religious landowner recognizes a responsibility to the community that has been its host as well as to the broader community of all living things, and acknowledges the great value to all of maintaining land in an undeveloped or agricultural state. As steward of the land, the religious landowner shows awareness of the responsibility to ensure that the social equity is preserved and that the land itself, and its value to the community, are not destroyed.

The Religious Lands Conservancy believes that much of the socially responsible thinking about how religious landowners view their assets is evolving to include the intrinsic natural resource and spiritual values of the land.

McHugh says, "It is our hope that religious landowners, in thinking about the disposition of their lands, will make their decisions in the context of these values. To recognize that the land itself has intrinsic natural resource value that should be preserved rather than paved." This is a perspective religious communities and conservationists can share: land is an asset that becomes the legacy you leave behind.

Challenges of Conserving Religious Lands

While sharing many values, these two communities rarely speak a common language. Religious communities don't necessarily relate to secular language very well, particularly on matters that at their root are legal. And most land conservation people don't know how to talk to religious people, who are speaking from the perspective of their mission and spiritual operation.

For example, at Mount Saint Mary's Abbey (*below*) on the Wrentham-Franklin border, 48 Cistercian (Trappistine) Sisters live a cloistered life in community that calls for simplicity, hiddenness, work, prayer and service. Their daily life balances work—cultivating their subsistence garden, tending the flock of sheep, maintaining the physical plant of their



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monastery, grounds and guesthouse or making candy for sale—with prayer in various forms and holy reading. Their contact with the outside world is intentionally limited to avoid unnecessary distraction, though they do maintain a caring knowledge of the more important issues and events. A contemplative atmosphere for themselves and for those who come to pray with them is vital to their way of life, as well as the main attraction for those who come to make a retreat or to discern their own calling. This separation is possible because the Abbey is situated on over 600 acres of woodland and farmland. But as the area rapidly develops, the Sisters are increasingly sensitive to the possibility of encroachment from the outside world. It is this concern and their daily contact with the beauties of their land that provide impetus to consider preservation.

In October 2005, Religious Lands Conservancy hosted a conference to explore the values and mission common to both religious communities and conservation organizations,

to discuss the challenges these communities face and to begin to develop a common language. The current economic and social climates for these communities present some unique challenges.

■ **There is conflict between traditional, people-focused missions and the new focus of missions that place care for the planet as their greatest priority.** At a time when the resources of many of these communities are dwindling, the members may be reluctant to spend those resources in the service of this new mission. Knowledge about the plight of the planet and why land preservation is so vital may not have spread throughout the community. And, as many of these communities consolidate to conserve scant resources, members from other locales may be involved in making decisions about a property. Education may be the best tool for gaining support.

■ **Many religious communities are shrinking, even disappearing.** As the remaining members age, much of the focus must shift from actively pursuing a mission to providing for retirement and health care. Most of these communities are financially independent, receiving no support from a centralized church organization. As financial pressures increase, a community may be forced to look to the land as their last remaining asset. Like most farming and ranching families, many religious communities who wish to remain on their land must realize some financial benefit from conserving it.

■ **There is great concern for who will continue the community's mission once the current generation of members is gone.** The activism of the '60s and '70s energized religious communities and change was driven by younger members. With few, or no, new members entering the orders now, who will drive this new ethic and continue this work? For some communities, the answer is clear: those who care about the preservation of the Earth may continue this work. Communities of faith are creating new connections by offering their lands to farmers, establishing community-supported gardens and providing places where people can reconnect with unspoiled natural areas and wildlife habitat.

■ **There is recognition of the importance of relationships to their near neighbors and to the global neighborhood of the Earth.** Through the traditional missions of service to humanity, these communities have long histories of caring for their neighbors. Now there is a growing appreciation for the web of relationships that connects all beings and an awareness that care for the planet has the highest priority. What legacy will these communities leave? Many will bequeath their lands as their legacy to the future.

Keys to Success

We hear consistent advice from conservationists whose efforts with faith-based communities have succeeded:

- Work to develop trust based on shared values between the landowner and conservationists—success is dependent on it.
- Ensure that the right people, the decision-makers, are at the table. Involving these parties early, even if they are at

Resources

- **Crystal Spring Center for Earth Learning**
www.crystalspring.org
- **Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition** www.massland.org
- **Religious Lands Conservancy methodology document**
www.ltanet.org; search "religious"
- **The National Religious Partnership for the Environment**
www.nrpe.org
- **Religious Organizations Along the River (ROAR) has been reaching out to land trusts in the Hudson Valley;**
www.scny.org/ecological_orgs.html
- **"Religious Congregations on the Land: New Models for the Church,"** Sister Kathleen Storms, SSND, Center for Earth Spirituality and Rural Ministry, Mankato, MN;
www.ncrlc.com/religiouscongregationsland.html
- **"Stewards of the Earth: The religious mission to protect the environment is growing rapidly to encompass the world's major faiths,"** Jim Motavalli, *emagazine.com* November-December 2002; www.emagazine.com/view/?924

a distance and have little contact with the land in question, allays fears and allows questions to be easily dealt with.

■ Take time for the process; avoid expediency. A successful project with the Society of St. Margaret in Duxbury took five years: gaining trust for one year; defining the project for three years; then completing the project in another year.

■ Maintain communication. Meet, update and document regularly.


■ Encourage the landowner to hire the most experienced professionals, those with expertise in this type of project, for services such as legal and surveying.

■ Develop a process for solving problems when things get difficult. When roadblocks crop up or misunderstandings arise, an established method of resolving them will keep negotiations open.

■ Respect the interests of each party while focusing on common goals. To be a success, each party must get some things they want from the project.

■ Work to complete the project with mutual respect and the sense of a job well done. Remembering the values you share, the project's success is a win for all involved.

Vision for the Future

As the writer Loren Eiseley has warned, science alone will not save the world. Whatever our spiritual or ethical tradition, whether we view ourselves as stewards of the Earth or as keepers of the Garden, we share a task in which we must not fail. It is clearly time for land trusts to take the first step in approaching communities of faith to work together for the preservation of the Earth. 

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