Dear Sisters, Associates, and Friends...

During each of the last three Summers, our issue of Voices has been dedicated to exploring one of four commitments we made as a Congregation at the General Chapter of 2010. In this issue, we complete the journey by exploring the challenge of our commitment “to live simply and sustainably for the sake of the whole Earth community.”

As you will see in the diverse stories that our Sisters and Associates share in this issue, this commitment is interpreted widely, depending on one’s context.

We begin with a view of the commitment shared by Sister Patricia Siemen that emerges from a spiritual awakening to her oneness with all creation, “a single sacred community.” An experience in the wilderness evokes insights in Sister Suzanne Schreiber of what is essential, while Sister Susan Van Baalen talks about taking steps toward dispossession as she enters, in the Hindu tradition, the “forest dweller” and “wandering hermit” stages of life.

In an article written by Sister Barbara Kelley, Sister Mary Ellen Leciejewski describes her work in promoting sustainable practices in hospitals to ensure they are not harming Earth as they heal bodies. Sister Nancy Murray takes us to the Amazon through her artistic portrayal of the life of Sister Dorothy Stang, SNDdeN, and, in another article by Sister Barb Kelley, we see how our Sisters in the Philippines are responding to the immediate impacts of global climate change while also planting seeds for a sustainable future.

Associate Patricia Gillis and Sister Nancyann Turner each share their experiences of living the commitment in urban Detroit, with its imperatives for social justice. And Sister Carol Coston shares the possibilities of how we might live out this commitment communally on the 80+ acres of land that have sustained the Congregation since the late 1800s.

Through the power of images, Sisters Barbara Chenicek and Rita Schiltz provide us with visual reflections of simplicity.

Finally, we are treated to the insights of Caldwell Dominican Sister Miriam Therese MacGillis, an internationally renowned ecological leader grounded in the new cosmology.

In this issue, we honor the 4,060 years of commitment to vowed life of the 67 Dominican Sisters of Adrian who are celebrating their Double Diamond, Diamond, Golden, and Silver Jubilees this year. May their fidelity to this life be a sign of our commitment as women religious to extending our “compassion and our wisdom and our caring,” as Sister Miriam Therese urges us, “not just to every other human but to every being.”

Attracta Kelly, OP
Prioress
We commit to live simply and sustainably for the sake of the whole Earth community.

General Chapter 2010

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Reflecting our ecological concerns, this publication is printed with soy inks on paper that is 100% recycled, 100% post-consumer waste, acid free, processed chlorine-free, and made in America with renewable energy.
The invitation to “live simply and sustainably for the sake of the whole Earth community” has taken several decades for me to internalize. For my first 40+ years, I didn’t have a clue that the Earth community even existed. I thought the only community I had to be concerned about was my human family, religious community, and then the wider global human family. Nature—or the Earth community—was never on my radar screen.

As my eyes opened to the single, comprehensive community that sustains all life, my sense of belonging to a larger universe community began to take root. My experience of God and search for the Holy One became more embodied. I found the Sacred embedded in myself and all of creation, even hidden sometimes within destructive powers that can give rise to regeneration.

Today my spirituality and relationship with the Holy One is framed primarily through a contemplative experience of being a part of an integral, dynamic whole that is evolving towards the fullness of the Cosmic Christ. This journey towards an evolving, unitive, Christic consciousness is part of an evolutionary process that recognizes our cosmic oneness. And the “our” I speak of is not just a human oneness. It includes all members of the Earth community—all species, ecosystems, atmospheric and geo-chemical-biological spheres—that belong to a single, emergent, life generating process.

I am learning that all religious traditions, at their best, are carriers of the seed of Eternal Truth that all is one. My own journey into the landscape of evolutionary consciousness was shaped initially by experiences of social and structural injustices and a longing for a sense of right relationships.

In my early 30s, I was ministering as a community organizer in the rural South. I saw firsthand the structural injustices perpetrated against people of great integrity because of institutionalized racism and poverty. My middle class frameworks began to disintegrate as I saw people’s authenticity and equality denied and denigrated. Clearly, this was not a situation of “right relationships.”

 Shortly thereafter, I had my feminist awakening: belonging to a Church that refused (still does) to recognize the inherent equality of women, and being told that one couldn’t even discuss whether women might be called to priesthood within the Catholic Church. Clearly, this was not a situation of “right relationships” either. I went to law school so I could help “level the playing field” for those without political or economic power.
It was not until 1988 that I first awakened to the idea that other species had a right to exist and flourish, as well. Thomas Berry was giving a talk where he said, “I think if all the other species in the world could vote, they would vote the human off the planet.” I had never heard such a radical idea. The concept of Earth Democracy, of Earth Jurisprudence, disturbed me deeply. But I wasn’t in a position emotionally, spiritually, or intellectually to deal with it. I knew there had to be some connection between the violation of human rights and the violation of environmental rights, but I did not know how to put it together.

The prodding of Miriam Therese MacGillis, OP, eventually led me to study the writings of Thomas Berry on this topic, especially his articulation in 2001 of common principles underlying the qualitative rights of all beings, in *The Origin, Differentiation and Role of Rights*. In 2006, with the support of a Gendron Grant from the Congregation and approval by Barry University, I began the Center for Earth Jurisprudence at Barry University School of Law, where it continues today.

The mission of the Center is to educate, advocate, and promote legal and cultural transformation, recognizing the inherent rights of nature to exist, fulfill its purpose, and thrive. Changing a legal system that treats nature and “the environment” as property to be used and exploited to one that respects the integral “harmonized diversity” of all members of the Earth community is a monumental multi-generational and international cause. A global movement to that end began in 2010 and the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature now has members in 14 countries. I spent February of 2015 working with colleagues across India who are striving to create local and regional laws that recognize the inherent rights of nature—of forests and wetlands and seeds (as well as tribal peoples who live in the forests and along seacoasts)—to maintain their integrity to function and regenerate according to their inherent biological and ecological integrity.

Today, the laws of physics are working against us. We no longer have the luxury of generations to ignore climate change, rising sea levels, and extinction threats facing Earth’s viability. The reality of ecological refugees and the reduced capacity of Earth to function with long term health is already upon us. We face a grave moral and ethical situation. We humans still act as though we are separate from and not an integral part of the Earth community.

At its heart, the threats to the Earth community are truly a spiritual crisis. Will we awaken to see our oneness with all that Holy Mystery has provided with such abundant diversity and communion? Author Terry Tempest Williams writes, “The Eyes of the Future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time.”

Let us hear the voice of the Beloved within all that is around us and in us. Let us choose to be part of the “breakthroughs” needed, choosing to care for the land given into our stewardship, and to care for our bodies, and the bodies of others who suffer from ecological harm and social violence. Let us become mentors, partners, and companions to others, especially the young among us, who are hungering for examples of living right relationships and the building of a single, sacred community. Let us choose to freely and lovingly live simply and sustainably, so others can live.
May we come to love what is spare.

In simplicity find presence.
A camping retreat in the wilderness of North Manitou Island in 2013 was, for me, a living experience of simplicity and sustainability. I was invited to join 10 women for a week-long journey into the northern Lake Michigan island and, at the same time, give backpacking a try. This was a bit of a stretch, but others were willing to “schlep” for me, if needed; I was in the “lighter load” group.

My intention was to live into the message of Hosea 2:14: “I will lead her into the desert and there I will speak to her heart.” Our wilderness offered nothing but sand dunes, beaches, native plants, dune grass, contiguous forests, and trails. “Bring only essentials” was the mantra; listening to the heart of the elements and one another was the primary principle.

I saw this experience as a rite of initiation into elder years, living with the paradoxes of weakness and strength, caring for self and others.

I learned some essentials about the wilderness and life as I strove for simplicity:

• Living deliberately, with very little, is possible.
• I can leave things behind.
• Seeking quiet within and without is essential.
• We are always on holy ground.
• A lifestyle different from the dominant culture is a choice.
• Companions can help each other on the journey to simplicity.
• Circles of sharing take us deeper.
• The physical challenges can be endured together.
• Skilled leadership helps to focus group energy.

On North Manitou we all grew into the experience. The notion of “survival together” was felt as we lived through rain, wind, moonlight, sunlight, and darkness. Without the distractions of daily life we were able to reflect on that which is most essential, and take the experience home.
Healing the Whole Body
Barbara Kelley, OP

The words at left, by Sister Mary Ellen Leciejewski, OP, sum up the ministry she has been involved in for the past 20 years at Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz, California—organizing efforts to make the hospital in which she is based, and the Dignity Health hospital system of which it is a part, more sustainable and responsive to the health needs of planet as well as patients.

Sister Mary Ellen has been committed to caring for Earth since 1982, when she attended a workshop given by Caldwell Dominican Sister Miriam Therese MacGillis, OP, founder of Genesis Farm (see page 19). “That set me on the journey,” Sister Mary Ellen recalled. “I probably didn’t fully understand, but I knew her workshop touched me deeply.”

As Director of Ecology at Dignity Health—a 60,000-employee health care system with 39 hospitals and 380 care centers—Sister Mary Ellen has been able to leverage its purchasing power to change hospital practices that can have a profoundly negative impact on the environment. “Traditional health care has been toxic or detrimental to the planet because of the plastic we use,” as well as the failure to reuse or recycle the various supplies, Sister Mary Ellen said. “We’re trying to go upstream and look at products and redesign them so that at the end of their life they’re not toxic,” Sister Mary Ellen explained. The use of mercury is an example.

Dignity Health, then known as Catholic Healthcare West, was instrumental in moving the health care industry away from the use of mercury thermometers because of the toxic effect that mercury has on the human body. In 2001, when Sister Mary Ellen brought up the idea of eliminating mercury from the thermometers, she said, the “manufacturers looked at us cockeyed. Now you can barely find a thermometer with mercury.”

Sister Mary Ellen and her colleagues also played a key role in removing two harmful chemicals from plastic intravenous bags and tubing. Leveraging its purchasing power, Dignity Health in 2005 switched vendors and committed to spending $70 million in buying intravenous supplies from a vendor who could provide toxin-free products.

Sister Mary Ellen has also worked with manufacturers to eliminate toxic dyes from plastic products that patients use routinely—bedpans, mugs, and basins, for example. And Dignity Health became the first healthcare organization to voluntarily submit data on greenhouse gas emissions. As the San Francisco Times, wrote at the time, “Noting

“In health care, we’re all about healing the body or creating conditions where the body could be healed. But we also need to create conditions so the whole body—the Earth—is healed.”
that health in its broadest sense is part of Dignity Health's Catholic mission, 'we're not going to have healthy patients if we don’t have clean air, earth and water,’ said Sister Mary Ellen Leciejewski” (September 5, 2004).

In addition to looking upstream, Sister Mary Ellen also looks at the downstream impact of hospital practices. “It makes no sense to work with our patients and then trash the environment. So the other thing we try to do in terms of waste is to watch whatever goes out of our back door—batteries, fluorescent bulbs, computers, paper. Take a look at it. Figure out where it needs to go.”

At perhaps a more basic level, Sister Mary Ellen has been working with the hospital system to ensure that the food served there is healthy. “The food we take in either creates health or not,” she explained.

Dominican Hospital is collaborating with other hospitals that share the goal of serving antibiotic-free chicken. The antibiotics that chickens ingest can make a

human’s system immune to the effects of antibiotics when they’re really needed.

“This is where going upstream is important in finding out where the problems start,” Sister Mary Ellen said. She explained that

dominant Hospital is collaborating with other hospitals that share the goal of serving antibiotic-free chicken. The antibiotics that chickens ingest can make a

and bigger when you talk about community,” Sister Mary Ellen explained. “It’s not just our little community any more. It has to be broader. The more we share what we’re doing with others and the more they share what they’re doing at home or in a business, the more we create a bond because we realize why we’re doing it. We’re doing it so we can have a planet that is healthy for us all. When you share like that, you create community and you demonstrate what’s important—food, air, water, relationships. This whole thing has been relationship building.”
The Hindus may be on to something! A recent study of Hinduism reminded me of the importance of letting go. In the Hindu culture, four stages of life are well defined: a) student; b) householder; c) forest dweller; and d) wandering hermit, in which the Hindu renounces all, in preparation for Enlightenment.

It is between the third and fourth stages of life that I find myself now. Behind me are the years of faithful study and community; before me are the days of the forest dweller (retiree) and the wandering hermit where renunciation of earthly goods takes precedence over all else—in preparation for my reunion with all that is God.

Not easy years, I would say, but for me, years filled with a new awareness and new challenges to live simply and sustainably.

My first venture into simplicity and sustainability was a lot of fun! Once I realized I had much, much more “stuff” than I needed, I began a yearlong daily disposal regimen. My dining room table became my repository for extra “stuff.” Each day one item went to the table, where three piles separated “stuff” to shred and throw out, to re-gift, or to donate to the St. Vincent de Paul Society thrift store.

This was a very easy project because I had so much “stuff.” It was fun, too, as I decided with whom I would like to share my many treasures. By year-end, I had 365 fewer possessions, and my apartment was less cluttered. Proud of my accomplishment, I decided to make this an ongoing project until I had no more “stuff.” I’m not there yet, but I’m close. Even the sorting table is gone. Almost all of my furniture, including the dining room table, was sold or donated to a poor family when I made the decision to spend the rest of my “forest dweller,” pre-Dominican Life Center years, in a furnished apartment. The furniture that comes with this kind of arrangement doesn’t always suit my taste or sense of design, but it’s comfortable enough and far from unsightly.

I’m down to almost no “stuff”—and lots of books! It feels good. I make frequent trips to St. Vincent de Paul to acquire gently used household necessities and to unburden myself from other “stuff” I just tend to accumulate.

I want to be ready as I approach the wandering-hermit stage, years of renunciation of all that is not of God. I want to be free of distractions and “stuff” that keeps me from living simply, sustainably, and ready for whatever comes next.

An added benefit is this: when the time comes for me to experience God and the universe in a new way, my Sisters will have an easy time of disposing with what is left. Just haul it off to St. Vincent de Paul!
Martyr of the Amazon
Nancy Murray, OP

After years of bringing to life Dominican Saint Catherine of Siena and her mindset as a 14th-century mystic, I have recently been brought back into the 21st century, the Amazon Rainforest, and the strong connection between sustainable living and the rights of poor people throughout the world.

All of this has come about since 2009 when members of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, of Cincinnati, asked me to portray their Sister Dorothy Stang, the “Martyr of the Amazon,” during special events marking the fifth anniversary of her death.

In preparation, I visited her Motherhouse, met with Sisters she knew and worked with in Brazil, visited with her family, and read about her life and death.

Sometimes I forget that I never really met Sister Dorothy because she’s become so much a part of me. I’ve portrayed Dorothy about 38 times now. I see such a determination in her. Sister Dorothy worked for the protection of the rainforest—which is crucial to the health of the Earth—and for the betterment of the farmers. She always wanted to go to the poorest of the poor. Once she’d help one group of people to be more self-sufficient, she wanted to move on to the next. She believed in their dignity and in their rights to food, clothing, and shelter.

When illegal loggers and corrupt ranchers tried to take advantage of the people by selling them fake land deeds, Sister Dorothy would be their advocate. Her work in teaching them sustainable farming practices was seen as a threat by loggers, cattle ranchers, agribusinesses, and land developers, who wanted to use the rainforest for their own gain. As a result of her efforts to organize the people and protect their rights, Sister Dorothy was shot six times and left for dead in the Amazon in February 2005, at the age of 73.

Sister Dorothy’s work in Brazil has vital implications for all of us. On their website, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur list some of the ways that the Amazon is so important to our world: it contains 50 percent of the world’s plant species and makes up 40 percent of the tropical rainforests of Earth. The beef cattle raised on deforested land in the Amazon is sold to the U.S. fast food chains that many of us patronize.

Sister Dorothy has made me much more conscious of our need to live sustainably, appreciating and caring for Earth in every way we can: whether it’s by planting and caring for trees, choosing to buy healthier foods and/or supporting farmers by buying at local farmers’ markets. She was great at making connections. She connected the people of a parish in her home state of Ohio with the people of the Amazon, and recognized the way we are all interconnected—oceans, people, forests, plants, and animals. I believe that if Sister Dorothy Stang were alive today, she’d ask us to help in any way possible, by connecting with one another—for the sake of the poor and the Earth community.
Sustainable Living: Battered by Climate Change
Barbara Kelley, OP

The Philippines is vulnerable to the effects of the global climate change, because of both the rise in the ocean level due to the melting of glaciers and the increase in tropical storms. In November 2013, the country suffered the effects of the massive Typhoon Haiyan, which killed thousands and cost countless others their homes and livelihood, especially in the central provinces of Visayas and Leyte.

Sister Zenaida Nacpil, OP, Chapter Prioress of our Sisters in Our Lady of Remedies Mission Chapter, Pampanga, Philippines said, “Amidst these sufferings, we should not forget the real causes of climate change in disasters like this, as well as the role of a corrupt system of government and the illegal logging and open-pit mining that have denuded our forests. It comes down to the greed of a few in our world at the expense of the poor majority.”

The Sisters responded to the disaster by providing the survivors with as much direct assistance as possible. Also, while their country was still in upheaval after the storm, the Sisters transported by bus about 1,000 seedlings of fruit trees, provided by the Department of Agriculture of the Philippines, to the islands affected by Haiyan. “It took three days’ journey,” Sister Zenaida recalled.

Sister Zenaida explained that the people in the affected regions had depended on coconuts for their livelihood, but the coconuts were knocked out by the typhoon. While it would take years for more coconuts to grow on newly planted trees, other fruit trees, such as guava and banana, will bear fruit much sooner. The people were also given seeds for various vegetables—which produced quickly and in enough abundance to allow families to sell some in the market and earn money. In the meantime, resourceful Filipinos made good use of the fallen coconut trees—turning them into posts to help support their rebuilt homes.

Our Sisters’ relief efforts also included working with other agencies to provide for the people’s immediate material needs, as well as offering pastoral
and grief support to the people who lost loved ones or who were in any other way afflicted by the typhoon.

The Sisters have not only worked hard to help their people through the crises caused by Typhoon Haiyan, but also with an eye toward building a sustainable future. Sister Myra Dalisay, OP, Director of Holy Rosary College in Tala, near Manila, and her predecessor, Sister Cora Quiambao, OP, hope to transform a vacant lot at the school into an ecology park. The park would take advantage of an abundance of trees to provide food for the people; work for the local farmers, who know more about the soil and the types of plants that grow well in it; and provide an opportunity for people to appreciate the garden.

“We will ask the farmers to help us and we will employ them,” Sister Cora explained. “They will have their small corner of the school, and employment. Then they can have their dignity.”

Sister Myra hopes the project will also bring in a small income for Holy Rosary, which was founded 60 years ago by the Dominican Friars to teach the children of people with Hansen’s disease. While those students receive a free education, Holy Rosary has earned a small income from other students from the nearby village, who pay a low tuition.

Sister Cora also plans a similar project at the Dominican School of Angeles City, in the Mining area, where she currently ministers as the principal. She envisions planting more trees to complement their current guava, cashew, and banana trees. The fruit would provide extra food for teachers and parents, and some employment for people who live nearby.

In addition, as educators, both Sisters hope to provide religious formation and to teach their students about sustainable methods of growing trees and vegetables and about the need to care for the environment. Sister Cora, who is dedicated to teaching street children as well as the students at the Dominican School of Angeles City, hopes to improve the students’ living conditions and help them to become responsible, aware citizens who have a positive influence on their country and on the world.

In their relief and ecclesial work, the Sisters are inspired by the culture and way of life of the Aeta people—one of about 15 groups of indigenous people in the Philippines. These groups “have different languages and cultural values,” Sister Zenaida said. “But one thing that weaves them together is they are closely united with nature. They are the natural environmentalists—they don’t abuse the Earth’s surroundings where they are. Their rituals and their songs and their dances are so much entwined with nature and the cycles of the seasons.”

She said the indigenous people have also taught her “that property is communal and justice is distributive.”

The Sisters have worked with the Aeta people in the mountain village of Villa Maria since 1995 when they were displaced by the volcanic eruption of Mount Pinatubo. Today, three days a week, Sister Jolyn “Jules” Dungo, OP, prepares food for about 400 students, in grade and high school, at the Villa Maria Integrated Schools.
In 2002, Sister Janet Stankowski, OP, and I founded Voices for Earth Justice as "an interfaith network of people committed to prayer, education, and action that deepen our sense of wonder, responsibility, and gratitude for all Creation."

Over the years, we have worked with local congregations, schools and non-profit groups, giving workshops, classes, and retreats, and organizing activism for environmental justice.

In October 2011, our dream of establishing a center where our mission could be lived out, demonstrated, and celebrated came true when Voices for Earth Justice purchased five lots with two abandoned houses in northwest Detroit’s Brightmoor neighborhood. One of the houses will be used as a caretaker cottage for Naim Edwards, our Garden Outreach Coordinator, and the other as a community center, offering hands-on and visual materials on plants and insects.

Brightmoor is six square miles, 600 acres of which is vacant land, many parcels with dilapidated, empty dwellings. Forty percent of the children in Brightmoor live in poverty, compared with 13.9 percent of children statewide. The vacancy rate for houses is 30 percent, resulting in much blight and illegal activity. On our street, Greydale, half of the lots are either empty or have an abandoned, often burned-out house. Our five lots had been abandoned for 10 years, and the two houses had been stripped of electrical wire and copper plumbing by neighborhood scrappers.

Over the years, Voices for Earth Justice had assisted many local congregations and individuals in their attempts to be more “green.” Now we had to come up with a plan to live simply and sustainably at what we’ve called “Hope House,” on the corner of Greydale and Puritan.

Some first steps were obvious: remove or trim the overgrown trees that were damaging the roofs, and remove the garbage dumped in the back yard. As we worked that first year, we made constant discoveries. For example, we discovered four stately oak trees, more than 300 years old, which had survived the clearcutting of the neighborhood in the 1920’s. Under the garbage were large beds of perennial plants, including lilies and daffodils. We also found architectural details in the homes that we wanted to preserve, and a rich history of the neighborhood.

When a new set of more complex decisions had to be made about what and how to rehabilitate the house and property, we relied on our guiding vision: “To live simply and sustainably for the sake of the whole Earth community.”
For us, living simply means to slow down and find the essentials in a situation. This was very difficult for me. The broken windows, overgrown grass, and the Brightmoor Gang having free run of our buildings offended my sense of order and beauty. I was in a big hurry to “fix” everything. Through the grace of God, simplicity prevailed, and we listened respectfully to our neighbors about the history of the land. We reverently watched the change of seasons, and the cycles of life of the plants and animals.

For example, we noticed that because of the dense shade under one of the old oak trees in the front yard, little grass or other vegetation was growing. About 60 old cinderblocks were haphazardly piled next to a fence, not too far from the base of the old tree. One day we arranged the blocks under the tree to create the container for an oval garden, running it as a border next to the driveway. A supporter brought a truckload of compost from his city’s municipal compost pile. The next week some volunteers working to clear the drain in the street of debris discovered black soil with worms under the accumulated leaves, composting in the street. Soon we were loading the compost into five-gallon buckets and wheelbarrows, and transporting it to the newly formed raised bed garden.

The garden now supports many perennial, shade loving indigenous Michigan plants like astilbe and ferns. The evolution of this flower bed taught us something else about living simply: we could create beauty and remove blight, using materials and volunteers that were already there!

Simplicity calls us to cultivate our experience of intimate connection with all life forms at Hope House. We do this through simple hospitality; for our fellow humans it is a warm welcome and sharing of the beauty of the place. For the plants and animals, it is respecting their rights to live as they have on this land and in this ecosystem for thousands of years. For example, when we planted a rain garden to absorb storm water overflow, we planted milkweeds, so that the once prolific monarch butterfly could once again flourish in northwest Detroit.

The second part of our vision, living sustainably, also poses a challenge and some discoveries. Our favorite definition of sustainability is “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” We do not know what Brightmoor will look like in the future. Although we participate in planning processes like Detroit Future City and Restore the Moor, we discovered we cannot foresee nor control the many variables that affect the outcomes in our beloved community. What we can do is live sustainably on our corner, so that whatever develops will be built on the foundation of a healthier and thriving Earth community.
When I was a child, growing up in West Palm Beach, Florida, I thought of the natural world as a constant companion. It was an embodied tactile relationship: I climbed trees, swam ocean, rode waves, explored woods, fished lakes. I played in this Florida world daily—joyfully and unafraid.

As a child, I even thought hurricanes were great fun: days out of school, huge waves in the ocean, pelting rain and flooded streets. Now, as a woman, I know differently. Hurricanes can be most destructive, particularly if we humans have messed with nature, as in destroying the wetlands that previously protected New Orleans.

After 19 years of almost daily sunshine, I came to the Congregation on February 2, 1955, from my aunt’s house outside Pittsburgh, a few days after seeing snow for the first time, snow that continued falling. My uncle drove recklessly to the airport, dodging snow banks and closed roads to get me to the plane on time. I sprinted onto the runway, raced up the stairs to the plane door (remember this is 1955), and, realizing I still wore my aunt’s snow boots, stopped at the top of the stairs, flung the boots dramatically onto the runway, waved goodbye to my relatives, and caught a fleeting glimpse of my mother at the terminal window as I threw myself breathlessly into the seat.

I arrived in Detroit, warmly greeted by Sister Brigetta and her nephew, and drove to Adrian, accompanied by Brigetta’s fervent prayers (and directives): My Jesus Mercy (watch that car!). Blessed Mother Protect Us (slow down!). Sweet Jesus Help Us (look out!). Finally (we all thanked God), we arrived in Adrian, and the formal parlors of Madden Hall.

I knew I was not in Florida anymore. But I also knew I belonged in Adrian—then and now.

The ensuing years in ministry provided extensive travel opportunities to appreciate differences among the world’s peoples, places, and cultures, observing biodiversity in farming methods and seeing the natural abundance nature can provide. International experiences engendered a keen interest in trying different foods, learning diverse culinary practices, and creating new dishes.

In the 1970s, while working at NETWORK in Washington, DC, I began to garden extensively, immersing myself in learning organic methods, always attuned to its maxim “to give back to Earth as much or more than you took from her.” I certainly felt more attuned to Earth as I gardened than walking the marble halls of Congress! Years later, I felt drawn to study and practice permaculture, resonating with its philosophy of working with, rather than against, nature, of respecting and making best use of nature’s abundance. Permaculture is a design system that values diversity, catches and stores energy, produces no waste, integrates rather than separates. Its vision is Earth Care, People Care, Fair Share; ours is Seek Truth, Make Peace, Reverence Life.

In 2011, I returned to our Motherhouse to work with the sacred land left to us by our sister foremothers. What do we want to give back to them and to Earth?

The title to St. Joseph Hospital and Farm, filed on May 1, 1884, in Lenawee County reads: “Property described in the Abstract—50 acres, more or less. Consideration: $6,000.00.” On April 19, 1887, the second tract of land, as described in the Abstract, reads, “Consideration: $511.30.”

What are the human stories enshrined in these dry facts? For this, we read in Sister Mary Philip Ryan’s history of the Congregation, Amid the Alien Corn:

There was an enormous debt for these nuns whose purse was
empty: a mortgage of $4,506 on the land at six per cent interest. … There were fifty-five acres of land that had to be put to work…. Windmill, well, plow, wagon, horses, cows, chickens, wheat, rye, clover seed—all these purchases, and more, were necessary for the productive working of the farm. …A payroll for part-time hired farmhands and threshers adds to the evidence that there was a brave attempt to run a farm” (p. 86).

Apparently they learned, because we later read:

The farm produce must have been ample for both patients and sisters, for there are no expenditures for fruits and vegetables (p. 86). …When vegetables and fruits were ready for canning, the nuns and Mother [Camilla] met in the kitchen or paring room to work together for the common good. …The interminable canning bees became a legend” (p. 132).

How does this image of living simply and sustainably speak to us in 2015?

Michigan is an agricultural state. Why are we shipping food here from thousands of miles away? Learning how to grow and prepare healthy food on fertile soil right here, how to preserve and share the surplus, and how to save the best seeds are life skills we could relearn and teach to others. If “sustainable” means providing basic needs for this generation without harming the next generation, could this land be farmed again to feed the Motherhouse residents and others?

We know there are young people attracted to permaculture and farming who don’t have access to land. Can we design ways for them to work with us on our land that are mutually beneficial, such as setting up a permaculture training center, bartering food for work, learning ways to extend the growing season with hoop houses, indoor mushroom growing, heirloom seed saving, canning and dehydrating skills? Could we establish a food hub with a year-round farmer’s market, or set up incubators for food-related businesses, or offer classes on how to cook fresh vegetables?

In our existing permaculture site, about 9.5 acres east of the Dominican Life Center, Stan Goff, part-time permaculture worker, has already planted a large flat asparagus bed and two long berms of berries above the Regina parking lot. Further north, grounds co-workers Brett Terry and Joe Hewlett augured 12” holes for the 100 assorted fruit trees planted in late fall 2014 by volunteer Sisters and Co-workers, as the beginning of a food forest. The trees were ordered from White Oak, an Amish nursery in Pennsylvania with whom you communicate by letter—no phone, email, or website orders.

I delight in such diversity, both cultural diversity and biodiversity, but I also grieve at how we humans continue to abuse the natural world. To quote Brigetta: My Jesus Mercy! Blessed Mother Help Us!

Along with lamentations, I want to retain a child’s wonder and hope in what we can do now to cooperate with nature, not dominate her, and to live sustainably. Perhaps farm and share with others the fruits of our farming?

Above: Compost-filled berms will yield many berries. Below: Stan Goff and Carol discuss the progress of the rain garden.
Over the years I have learned to live more simply. I have learned to eat more simply. I have learned to celebrate more simply. I have learned to lower heat and to teach urban gardening.

Living in a community of five Dominican women also helped expand even further the opportunities for living simply. Yet, as I ponder this commitment to live simply, I realize that my efforts pale in the light of the many Detroit families that I serve.

I have choices. I have resources. Some of the mothers I serve sell their furniture in order to put food on the table. Some families have to choose between needed medicines or school supplies and uniforms.

Living simply and sustainably cannot be just a personal choice or even a Congregational choice.

We must advocate and collaborate and communicate, as well, so that individuals and families can break out of oppressive poverty. We must create giant waves of people who can help families reach an income level at which they have choices and resources. We must build a sense of outrage over the situation of families who have few choices about living—except to survive.

I cannot just rest on my decision to live simply—I must work to the bone, pray to the heavens, and challenge the authorities until every Detroit home has heat, running water, street lights that work, bus systems that serve, neighborhoods that sustain community and gardens.

Then, my commitment to live simply will put me in communion with all of us who strive to live simply—and actually build momentum for others to have choices for life rather than just survival.
“You could spend your whole life just contemplating this one concept: that Earth is alive.

It isn’t a dead planet with life on it. It’s alive.”

Sister Miriam Therese MacGillis, OP

Caldwell (New Jersey) Dominican Sister Miriam Therese MacGillis, OP, has served since 1980 as the founding director of Genesis Farm, where thousands of women religious and other women and men have participated in and been inspired by courses and workshops she has offered on Earth Literacy and the new cosmology. Genesis Farm has one of the oldest Community Supported Gardens in the country, established in 1988, with a shareholder base of 300 local families. Sister Miriam received the 2005 Thomas Berry Award from the Center for Respect for Life and the Environment “in recognition of the 25th anniversary of Genesis Farm and in celebration of the remarkable leadership she has given to the universe story vision.” Sister Miriam is arguably the leading force behind the “Green Sisters” movement.

Staff writer Barbara Kelley, OP, spoke with her about our planetary crisis, evolution, and the new dimensions to which women religious are being called.

Your work in Genesis Farm has been grounded in the thought of Thomas Berry. What was the central insight from the work of Berry that shifted your own consciousness and led you into this work?

I first heard him speak in 1977 about the issue of contemplation and world order. At one point, he spoke about the two books of revelation. He’d say, “Take your sacred texts, your Scriptures, and put them on the shelf for about 10 years and read the universe first as the primary revelation of God. Then go back and pick up your sacred text, and it’s all going to make sense.” That sounded like such a radical idea, but what he was basically saying was, “If you see your sacred books as the primary way God has revealed, then you’re going to continue to try to jam and push and force the evolutionary story of the universe into that. But if you see that the universe itself is God’s primary revelation, it’s all going to make sense. It will fit. It’ll be included, but it doesn’t work the other way around.”
That was one of the central insights that shifted me, and then my work continued to unfold. I took his words to heart. It doesn’t mean I left my faith or I left my religion or I left my Order or any of that. It just meant that I made the created world my primary focus for contemplation, for study, for research, for understanding. And I found it to be absolutely mysterious and beautiful and more than I could ever have imagined as a way to go into the unknowable mystery of God.

Did that help you make sense of Scripture?

Yes. Because then I could see Scripture as humans reflecting on what they knew. There’s no way people 10,000 years ago or 5,000 years ago or even 500 years ago could have known that the universe was an evolutionary process. This understanding did not come about until very recently, with our capacity to create the kind of telescopes and instruments by which we can expand the human eyeball’s range of vision and see into outer space and go back in time. Nobody before us could do that, so they would never have been able to see the universe as evolutionary.

We now understand that the stars have a lifespan and that they actually create the chemical elements inside themselves, and they go through stages where they explode and spew out these chemical elements. And then we realize that our solar system came into existence as a result of that collapse of the former star.

You could spend your whole life just contemplating this one concept: that Earth is alive. It isn’t a dead planet with life on it. It’s alive. We can understand it in a way that our ancestors could not have known.

How would you describe the challenges and opportunities that we face at this moment in the evolution of our planet and our universe?

Well, the universe will go on doing what it’s doing. The planet is at a difficult moment in its five-billion-year history, because it has arrived in its evolution into this thinking being, this human being that thinks about itself. In our Western world… we have thought that the only beings that have souls, that have a spiritual aspect, are humans. That’s in question, of course, now. If we continue to think we’re separate—and we’re spiritual and everything is physical, and therefore we can own everything—the planet’s going to die.

If we can imagine and invent meaning, then we can change not only our sense of ourselves and the purpose of life, but we can begin to rethink ourselves as one species in the whole community of species on this beautiful, life-giving planet. And to me, that’s the greatest religious work we can do. I think these fundamental changes of the inner self open up the possibility that the planet can survive, that we can get past the violence and injustices and oppression and war. Our compassion and our wisdom and our caring can extend not just to every other human but to every being.

And how do you see women religious as playing a role in all of this, bringing about this greater awareness?
I think that if women religious really contemplate this new understanding, then we will have out of our own experience deep gifts to give. But if we don’t do it, if we continue to stay in old traditional interpretations of existence, we’re just going to die—and we will die as very good people who did very, very good things.

It’s not wrong. But the depth of calling that humanity is being asked to take could be assisted by women religious because we know how to live in community. We know how to live with diversity. We sacrifice our own personal ambitions and needs for the good of the whole. We’ve learned how to communicate, and no matter how stressful and intense it might be, we’ve learned to hold together as a body. We have a lot of learned behaviors and skills that are really helpful in this world. We tend to be very caring, because we’ve lived for something bigger than ourselves.

And so, if we would open up into this new dimension of understanding God, we’d open up the tradition to a greater, larger context of community. We wouldn’t lose anything. We’d gain an enormous amount. I think we have so much more to give. But if we don’t do that, I’m afraid it’s just the end of an era—in our case, an 800-year experiment in searching for truth and being out there, trying to communicate it.

**So evolution would actually be going past us?**

It will just pass us. It has passed other groups in the past. The Shakers don’t live any more. Their settlements and communities are beautiful artifacts, and I love them. But no one’s going to live under the belief system that they held. It worked for awhile, but we keep learning more and more things that are inconsistent with their beliefs. People will turn around saying the same of us.

Hopefully that won’t happen. But we don’t have a whole lot of time to take this much more seriously. Members in our congregations all over the country, all over the world, have been really attracted, deeply called by this evolutionary process and new cosmology. Look how far [Adrian Dominican Sister] Pat Siemen has taken the rights of Earth Jurisprudence, based on the universe story. Other people have been practicing law and they’re really doing a good job, but it’s not enough now. We’ve got to give rights to everything—so that everything can be protected. Rights don’t exist originally with the Magna Carta or the Constitution of the United States. The right to be has been implanted, embedded in the universe for 13 billion years.

**As Dominicans we’ve been saying, “What is Earth asking of the Dominican Order?” How would you answer that question, and why?**

Earth is asking that life will go on. Life is supposed to go on. It’s not supposed to be aborted. The Dominican Order has the orientation from throughout our history to grapple with complex issues and questions and stay with them until what can appear to be truthful is apparent, and then to challenge things that would violate that. Dominicans have the propensity to look at everything as deeply as possible from all perspectives.

Thomas Aquinas, when he said that philosophical thought should not contradict religious thought, was making a huge contribution in the human journey. If we were doing that now, we would be asking these deeper questions about our thinking and our ideas and the mental concepts that we have, that are not consistent any longer with what we’re discovering. That’s all search for truth. When we look out through a telescope or a microscope or we examine anything at the micro or macro level, we are searching for essence—the truth of the thing. So if we’re doing that, and fearlessly speaking the truth about what we have encountered and we’re doing it in this larger context, I think that’s what Earth would be asking of us.

*In your Winter Solstice letter you talked about the need for silence to tend to our inner selves. What connection do you see between tending to our inner selves and tending to Earth?*

Well, I think the connection is that when we slow down and stop, we can be present to the outer world, the night sky, the waters and the natural world. The more we can be present, the more other beings can reveal themselves to us. We have to pay attention. That’s what the poets do. That’s what the artists do. But everyone’s a poet. Everyone’s an artist. We are all creators of
beauty, and we all respond to beauty. But we have to slow down. We have to turn off the artificial and give ourselves silence and permission to pay attention and be present to the larger world. In doing so, we will be tending to Earth.

Our Congregation committed ourselves to “live simply and sustainably for the sake of the whole Earth community.” What would you say to us about the personal and communal implications of that commitment, and how might we truly witness it?

There really are so many different ways, but one of the things I think we can do that would make a huge difference would be to look at our lands—the lands we say we hold in common. We don’t really own them just because we have a piece of paper that says we do. But how in this economy and this realm do we rethink our responsibility to hold our lands in trust and protect them for the future of the planet by rewriting the terms of our so-called ownership to give them perpetual protection? We can stop a lot of damage if we write into our deeds the conditions on which this land can be passed on. That’s one way.

The other part is, now that we’re much more aware of the impact of fossil fuels on climate and temperature, we should really look at our dependency on fossil fuels. How much travel do we do? Do we have a right to leisurely fly wherever we want? I think we have to look at that very, very seriously. The way we eat—where we get our food from. These are tricky matters because everybody is a little sensitive to that, but that’s why this deeper perception and attitude is so important, because when we realize what food is, coming from God and the miracle of food and what commercial, industrial, modern agribusiness has done to food—we would want to rescue it. Protect the wisdom of farming. People have done it carefully over so many generations.

How do we house ourselves? What do we bring into our spaces? Do we simplify them or clutter them? Can we shift back into a simplicity that allows simple things to give us joy? Can we contemplate their greater significance? So, a piece of paper is not just a piece of paper. It carries within it the memory of when it was a tree. The tree took its minerals and nutrients from the soil. The soil was formed by the last glaciation period. You begin to see what it took to get this piece of paper, and you honor it. You make it last as long as possible. It’s not something to be disposed of.

But that’s going to take a whole new discipline. That kind of simplicity is more related to what I think the vows could be than the way we often interpret them now. The meaning of our vows is longing to be evoked in a new way.

None of this is easy or simple. We’re all struggling in this together, but it’s worth struggling and staying with it rather than just giving up and retiring.

Do you see that we’re making any kind of headway—are we moving in that direction, do you think?

Well, I think there is movement that way, and then we do a dance with it. We take two steps forward, one step back. We all do. It’s hard. And if the whole community doesn’t carry a similar vision, then we don’t like to have stress and tension among ourselves. It can cause stress and tension because traditionally we’ve been so oriented toward human suffering, taking care of humans in need.

Very often, people say, “Why are you worrying about the land or the deer when humans are in need?” And that’s the wrong question. We shouldn’t get caught in the distinctions. It belongs to an old way of thinking. It’s all one. And that’s why searching for the truth and contemplating it is uniquely Dominican and it should be what we’re committed to—moving into this new contemplative stance.
Reflection Questions

• What does it mean to you to live simply and sustainably?
   With which of the stories in this issue do you resonate?
   Why?
• How would you respond to the challenge Sister Nancyann Turner poses when she states that “living simply and sustainably cannot be just a personal choice or even a Congregational choice”?
   What are the imperatives of this commitment for you?
• Do you share Sister Patricia Siemen’s view that “at its heart, the threats to the Earth community are truly a spiritual crisis”?
   If so, how can women religious respond or offer healing?
• In response to the question, “What is Earth asking of the Order,” Sister Miriam Therese MacGillis quotes Thomas Aquinas, who said philosophical thought should not contradict religious thought.

“If we’re fearlessly speaking the truth about what we have encountered and we’re doing it in this larger context, I think that’s what Earth would be asking of us.”

What do you make of that statement?

What truth might we need to speak fearlessly today about contractions in philosophical and religious thought?
DOMINIC

Night altar/Fanjeaux

Photo – Barbara Chenicek, OP
We Dominican Preachers of Adrian...

...impelled by the Gospel and outraged by the injustices of our day
seek truth, make peace, reverence life.
Stirred by the Wisdom of God and rooted in our contemplative prayer,
communal study and life in community,
we challenge heresies of local and global domination, exploitation,
and greed that privilege some, dehumanize others, and ravage Earth.
We confront our racist attitudes and root out racist practices in our lives and systems.
We confront systems where women are denied freedom, equality, and full personhood.
We walk in solidarity with people who are poor and challenge structures that impoverish them.
We practice non-violent peacemaking.
We promote lay leadership and shared decision-making for a renewed Church.
We live right relationships with Earth community.
We claim the communal authority and responsibility of our Dominican heritage.
We commit ourselves to live this vision.

General Chapter 2004

Our Vision continues to impel us...

...as contemplative ecclesial women, global citizens, and humans in God's unfolding universe:
We commit to live simply and sustainably for the sake of the whole Earth community.
We commit to study worldviews and emerging theologies informed by science and our suffering world.
We commit to open our hearts to the other and deepen our understanding of diverse cultures and beliefs.
We commit to claim our moral authority to speak truth in Church and society in the spirit of Catherine of Siena.
We call one another to mutual accountability and transformation.

General Chapter 2010
Congratulations 2015 Jubilarians

Silver Jubilarians

Ma. May L. Cano, OP

Golden Jubilarians

Andrea Balcons, OP
Judith Berwert, OP
Ethel Datz, OP
Marie Joy Feitler, OP
Rosemary Thomas Finnegan, OP

Janice Holkup, OP
Patricia Leonard, OP
Patricia McDonald, OP
Maureen McGrath, OP
Kathleen Nolan, OP
Karen Rossman, OP
Ann Ryan, OP
Sarajane Seaver, OP

Diamond Jubilarians

Barbara Ann Burns, OP
Leontia Cooney, OP
Carol Coston, OP
Sheila Delaney, OP

Therese E. Allgeyer, OP
Norine Burns, OP
Leontia Cooney, OP
Carol Coston, OP
Sheila Delaney, OP

Mary Ann Ennis, OP
Rosalie Esquerra, OP
Frances Mary Fitzpatrick, OP
Elizabeth Gibbons, OP
Mary Hemmen, OP
Rose Bernadette Hoeffner, OP
Mary Kastens, OP
Joan Leo Kehn, OP
Barbara Ann Long, OP
Jo Ann Lucas, OP
Congratulations and many blessings to the 2015 Double Diamond, Diamond, Golden, and Silver Jubilarians. Together they represent 4,060 years of dedicated service to the Adrian Dominican Mission.

May these Sisters know the heartfelt gratitude of the Congregation and of all the people whose lives they have touched.
We commit to live simply and sustainably for the sake of the whole Earth community.

General Chapter 2010