



STEWARDS OF OUR EARTH *All of God's Creation*

Social Justice Committee, Holy Cross Parish, Mt. Airy, April 13, 2025

Pilgrims of Hope for Creation: Nurturing Faith, Education, and Action

EcoPhilly's 4th Annual Summit was held on Saturday, March 29, 2025, at St. Thomas of Villanova's Parish. A community of 120 fellow travelers were welcomed and *called to table*, the name of our [opening prayer](#) for the day. Participants represented parishes across the Archdiocese (including four members of Holy Cross), higher educational institutions, four Catholic schools, and environmental, social service and charitable organizations.

Nicholas Collura, co-founder of [EcoPhilly](#) alongside John Humphreys, kicked off the summit by reminding us that Jesus himself walked in an ecospiritual light – born in a manger among animals, appearing to shepherds, speaking from mountains, preaching of sparrows, fish, and flowers. **This ecospirituality is embedded in the spirit of a missionary church**, and each of us at any age can bring his/her unique gifts to make an impact.

10th Anniversary of Laudato Si' – Global and Local

Our first panel framed its remarks in light of Pope Francis' urgent call to take responsibility for our common home in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* published in 2015. **Sr. Philo Morris of the Medical Mission Sisters** shared how *Laudato Si'* has impacted her work globally in response to the cry of the poor, **integrating care for the earth with healing**. For example, in the harvesting of soils, abstaining from the use of chemicals and pesticides leads to healthy soil, which leads to healthy produce, which leads to a healthy planet and healthy people. Farmers in India learned this from experience when their crops failed after using pesticides produced by Monsanto. They were plunged into debt, and many farmers committed suicide.

Laudato Si' was unknown to 26-year-old **Aldo Pierini** when he began studying engineering science and researching solutions to climate change. At Villanova, he was introduced to other perspectives including environmental stewardship. He realized that not every problem has an engineering solution and that **living a simpler life is an effective path to a healthier environment**. Aldo now works in the Office for Sustainability at Villanova, operates Villanova's Free Store, and teaches others to see the connection between their faith and social/environmental justice.

Lou Becht, Manager of the Strategy Office at the Archdiocese, is a key player in Archbishop Pérez's initiative to establish Missionary Hubs across the Archdiocese focused on renewal, rebuilding trust, and inviting non-participating Catholics and non-Catholics to a relationship with Jesus. It begins by "planting seeds and tending the garden as the fruits of our efforts begin to grow" (*An Invitation from Archbishop Pérez*). EcoPhilly with its focus on creation care may be an effective on ramp for some of the 83% of Catholics who no longer come to church.

Legislative Advocacy on the State and Local Levels

Our second panel shared their advocacy gifts, providing current legislative avenues for action on environmental policies. **Representative Greg Vitali, who chairs the Environmental Resources Committee**, noted the challenges we face in a fossil fuel state.

HB 109, which requires cumulative impacts to be considered when issuing certain environmental permits in environmental justice (EJ) areas, is one bill that has faced challenges in getting passed even though it promises to protect public health.

Another challenge Rep. Vitali noted is the **chronic understaffing of the DEP** (Department of Environmental Protection). This is despite a dramatic increase in responsibilities for more than 120,000 active oil and gas wells as well as plugging over a thousand abandoned wells that are leaking methane into the surrounding land and water. He also noted that one third of Pennsylvania streams are impaired in some way. Even though the Environmental Protection Agency requires states to inspect streams at least once every 10 years, the DEP water program only has staffing to inspect Pennsylvania streams once every 30 years.

He urged everyone to contact their legislators through meetings, letters, and emails, especially those who do not believe in climate change. We have a duty to care for creation.

A pioneer in environmental work since 1969, **Maurice Sampson II, the Eastern PA Director of the Clean Water Action Fund**, echoed the urgency of passing HB 109. “Historically, low-income and communities of color in Pennsylvania have been forced to bear a disproportionate share of adverse environmental impacts that result in poor health, including cancer and asthma.” However, he **noted that EJ areas are not just black and brown; most affected are white**. He shared a map indicating that most EJ areas are also Republican. **This is not a red/blue issue. We need to be green.**

Maurice urged people to join him on [Lobby Day at the State Capitol](#) on June 3 to urge legislators to step up and act. Legislators run for office every two years; it’s up to the voters to make things happen. And he advised “not to shoot for where it is, but for where it’s going to be.”

Litany of Actions for Creation and Table Presentations

There was no dearth of actions shared by parishes/organizations in this litany, each one receiving a shout out of Laudato Si’!! Actions posted on the Hope for Creation board included planting 23 trees; reducing our carbon footprint by eating less meat, using reusable water bottles, and turning off electronics when not in use; installing solar panels on our church building; drilling three water wells in Kenya in the last year; diverting 4,088 pounds of organic waste from local landfills and incinerators; and installing a stormwater management system with raingardens. (Yes, that last action is from Holy Cross.)

Throughout the summit, participants visited tables that surrounded the room displaying initiatives and information on environmental issues, improving people’s lives (locally and globally), energy efficiency, recycling, and ways to get involved.

Educational Efforts Across the Archdiocese

Our third panel included three teachers and six students from Norwood Fontbonne Academy, Pope John Paul II High School, St. Joseph’s Preparatory School, and St. Matthew School. **Students talked about the connection between their faith life and stewardship of God’s creation.** “Everything you see is made by God, so we need to care for it.”

At **Pope John Paul II**, care for creation is part of the mission. **Erin Gauntner** (teacher) shared some of the activities the school sponsors, including recycling 3-D printing waste, building a green house, supporting those with food insecurity through their work with Martha’s Choice, and increasing the number of water bottle filling stations. The school has also set a goal of recycling 1,000 pounds of waste and has already reached 90% of that goal.

Eileen Rocks, a teacher at **St. Matthew**, shared some slides on her school's activities. She asked students what they wanted to do, which led to actions around nature and animals and exploring their carbon footprint. An interest in recycling water bottles led to beautiful art class creations utilizing bottle caps.

At **Norwood Fontbonne**, students are advocates of social justice both locally and internationally. **Megan Stotz** (teacher) explained that students choose projects that match their ethics and values. In pursuit of a deeper sense of purpose, students first identify a problem such as the need for clean water and nutritious food, determine who is affected, offer a solution and why it will help, and then build the project.

Students from all four schools shared initiatives they have undertaken. They have engaged in tree planting, built refill stations, attended presentations and written about what they learned. To reduce their carbon footprint, they eat less meat, recycle, and use both sides of the paper for assignments. They engage younger students by visiting their classrooms to explain what it means to reduce their carbon footprint. Students also share their knowledge and activities with friends. One student remarked that **“we are about eco-hope, not eco-despair.”**

All the students were committed to caring for the earth and seemed undaunted by the challenges. They were confident, articulate, and hopeful in their responses. Some shared their aspirations for careers including environmental engineering, ecotheology, and journalism. Wisely, **one student remarked that any profession can involve environmental care in some way.** We would all be wise to take that idea seriously.

One summit participant in his 70s made this comment to the student panel: “Listening to you today makes me wish I was beginning my life over again.” **At the end of the summit, our participant pilgrims departed, nurtured by faith and fellowship, expanded in knowledge, and enthusiastic for action in their individual lives, their parishes/organizations and beyond to a wider world – *God’s creation restored.***

Comments on this column may be directed to the Social Justice Committee at socialjustice@holycrossphl.org. [Click here for column archive.](#)