

Quest for the Sacred

Walk in the Church of the Woods

ON SUNDAY MORNINGS, the Reverend Stephen Blackmer sends his congregation of many faiths to wander in the woods—106 acres of rolling hills and wetlands in Canterbury, New Hampshire. Blackmer places such a high value on individual contemplation of outdoors that 20 minutes of sacred aloneness in the wilds replaces the homily part of a service, which involves prayer, reading from the Bible or other texts, and singing—but no sitting in pews. He offers the morning’s ideas for contemplation, and when the congregants return to the central spot, they have the opportunity to share what came to them. In this sharing, Rev. Blackmer says, it’s the Earth speaking, and people are listening to each other. “The biggest part of the service is time in the woods and then time with each other. It is so central.

“Let’s change what church means,” says Blackmer, and that’s what his Church of the Woods (“not *in* the Woods”) is doing. At the end of the service is communion, and the first

bit of bread and the last drops of wine are offered to the Earth. Thus, the congregation expands to include the moose, fox, trees, and rocks. Each becomes part of the congregation and

the life of prayer. “This is intended for all creatures and species because of the sacredness of their existence,” says Blackmer, who believes that this sense of the sacred is fundamental to understanding how to care for this Earth.

Blackmer’s understanding is based on St. Francis and early strains of Christianity that recognized the role of the natural world—which mainstream churches have largely forgotten. Blackmer did not grow up attending any church, or even being particularly religious. Before he found his calling in pastoral work, Blackmer spent three decades as an environmental activist. He was always “a woods guy.” But now he is “a woods priest. Very much a priest. Eco-priest. *Priest* has a particular meaning—the role of Priest is to lift up the sacredness of the world so people can see it and participate in it. My job is to hold up/elevate the sacred everywhere so people can enter into it.”

When asked about his conversion experience, Blackmer laughs. “Conversion is not one time. It’s a continual process of turning to God, giving in to God/the Divine/the sacred/that which is bigger than we are.” He describes his journey and the ongoing moments of surrender in three big parts:

The first was a vision quest in the wilderness. “The act of being willing to undertake the vision quest itself and everything it took was an act of surrender. It’s an expression of willingness to step into the unknown. An explicit not-knowing.”

The second part was “an extended period of puzzling, being with the ‘I don’t know.’” He also says that

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Deepen conservation by restoring its understanding of the Earth as holy ground. We seek to deepen the environmental understanding that the Earth is replete with sacred identity, inherently worthy of love and care, and not merely raw material for human use.

Open people to be transformed so the Earth may be renewed. We seek to open people to inward transformation, believing that internal change in people is fundamental to renewal of the world, including conserving Nature. Without an inward change in people, no amount of politics, technology, science, economics, and conservation, however necessary, will ever be enough. Kairosearch.org



» *The Glass Menagerie*
Pete Sandker

surrender-in-action was hardest—to set foot in a church. Upon crossing the threshold into church—at that moment—he asked himself, “Do I belong here?” and there was an instant yes. “The call was to be a priest. That was a go/no-go moment,” and a huge act of surrender.

In the third part, Blackmer pondered whether he could live with having been afraid to say yes, or wondering what would have happened if he had said yes. He realized he could not live with the doubt, the not being willing to take the adventure. In due course, he enrolled in Yale Divinity School and was ordained by the Episcopal Church.

But even as a priest, Blackmer still felt most at home in the woods, rivers, and mountains. “Inside a church is nowhere near as rich and alive. . . . Everything that happens in a church happens 10 times more so outside.” And so he started a not-for-profit organization called Kairos Earth and went

looking for land. “While the woods ritual is exactly the same every week, because it is outdoors the experience can be different every week.”

When asked if his moments of ongoing surrender show up in his pastoral work, he said yes and no. Yes, they infuse everything. But no, his Church of the Woods has no sermon or homily, per se. He says he shares his story a lot, and it inspires people. “I often hear echoes in myself of St. Paul being knocked off his horse.” Then he goes on to tell that story as a significant turning point.

Blackmer says that religious stories are a vehicle for expressing experiences that are beyond ordinary language. But the experience of the woods is sacred in ways that no stories can get at. He sees his services as an invitation to get beyond language, and he envisions other churches of the woods or other natural areas developing in response, and in community with Church of the Woods.

—MEGGEN WATT PETERSEN

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you have **20 minutes:**

Spend it with the Earth, Go outside and rejoice in it, revel in it, thank it, love it.

If you have **\$50:**

Support the Church of the Woods at wildchurchnetwork.org

If you have **a weekend:**

Make a pilgrimage to Church of the Woods. They meet year round.

If you **feel called:**

Develop a Church of the Woods where you live.