

ENGAGING THE SPIRIT

Synod plan calls for 'green' efforts at St. Maria Goretti parish

BY VANESSA NEGRETE
Northwest Indiana Catholic

DYER – On the grounds of St. Maria Goretti, a walking path winds through patches of coneflowers, black-eyed Susans, marigolds and sunflowers stretching toward the sky. Brightly painted memorial benches and large pots overflowing with colorful flowers cover the concrete in front of the main entrance to the church.

The beauty is not just for show. It connects parishioners to the environment and creates a tranquil space. Guided by Father Charles Niblick, pastor, the parish has long embraced environmental efforts. The synod has given those efforts an extra push, said Debbie Lund, administrative assistant and synod liaison at the parish.

In its synod plan, the parish outlines goals to create a recycling consciousness in all buildings; develop specific recycling opportunities through careful choices of food and food service materials; create working gardens and “Make every effort to make our grounds living sacraments of God’s creative diversity, joy and pleasure,” states the plan.

On a practical level, that means more recycling, more gardens and more educating people—especially children—about respecting and connecting to the environment.

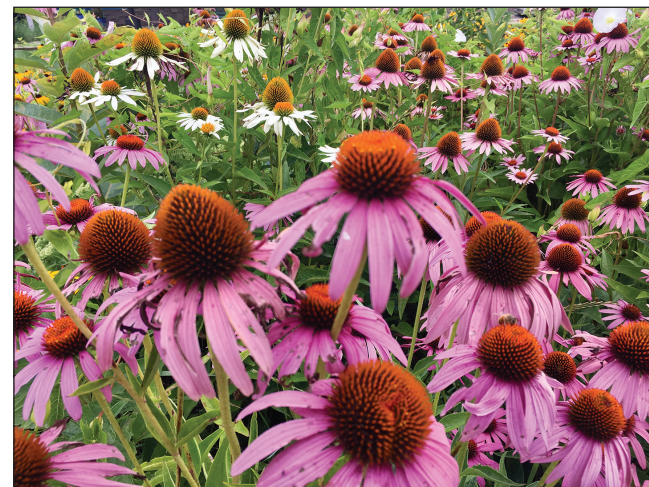
Children in vacation Bible school and in the parish religious education program have planted flowers, plants and corn. As they planted, Father Niblick talked to them about appreciating the Earth.

“When the kids were planting all these, they were breathing life into the seeds and planting them,” said Irene Szweczyk, office manager at the parish.

Moments to teach faith can happen in the garden, Lund said.



Josh Hilliard, maintenance worker at St. Maria Goretti in Dyer, weeds one of the gardens on the church grounds. The parish has an environmental focus as part of its synod plan. (Vanessa Negrete photos)



Coneflowers bloom in a garden at St. Maria Goretti in Dyer.



“It doesn’t just have to happen in our religious education classrooms or in the church,” she said.

Embracing an environmental focus for its synod plan made sense at the parish.

“Both the young and the old parishioners can relate to it,” Lund said.

The gardens on site are popular after Mass and even during the week, where people can find a sense of peace. The first set of plots went in about a year ago, two more were added recently and wooden garden boxes were added in the spring, Szweczyk said.

“It’s been an ongoing process,” she said. “We’re building, slowly but surely.”

About 10 years ago, the parish started working with a recycling company to haul away its recyclables. The parish receives a check in return, which goes toward community outreach for the food pantry, Szweczyk said.

“What we did as a staff

and as a parish, we kind of jumped off from that and we started one of our extensive recycling programs,” she said. “We have all the bins in our offices in addition to our (Casa Maria) hall. What we’re doing is we’re asking all of our staff members to make sure we’re doing our part to recycle.”

When the parish synod team met with Bishop Donald J. Hying to discuss their synod plan, he suggested they create a compost pile using food left over from events at the hall. The idea is something the parish is going to look into, Szweczyk said.

The parish did have a compost pile for a while, and it has a rain barrel to recycle water, Lund added.

Increasing the number of recycling containers on parish property will also decrease the garbage sent to the waste hauler, which will reduce the parish garbage costs, Szweczyk said.

The church often uses recycled materials in its projects. Parishioners donated old pots for children to use during vacation Bible school, for example.

“We ask (parishioners) sometimes to donate fabric, construction paper,” Szweczyk said. “We try to reuse what people may

have, and we’ve found that our parishioners are very giving in that aspect.”

Also, the parish is

switching from gasoline to propane-powered lawn equipment to be more environmentally friendly, Szweczyk said.

She said the parish is willing to work with other parishes in the diocese to talk about their environmental efforts.

“We’re all one diocese,” she said. “Let’s help each other.”

To tell us how your parish is following the Holy Spirit’s lead in this synod process, contact Vanessa Negrete at vnegrete@dgary.org or (219) 769-9292, ext. 246.

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