



# A History of the Center for Earth Spirituality and Rural Ministry and Living Earth Center

Shared by Sister Mary Tacheny  
CESRM Co-Founder  
Summer 2018

The development and on-going ministry of Living Earth Center has deep roots in the charism and heritage of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND). As a young girl, the SSND foundress, Caroline Gerhardinger, was encouraged to become a teacher within her parish in Bavaria by her pastor. A classroom was set up for girls who were not being educated in Germany, at a time of great political upheaval in the early 1800s. Gradually other young girls joined her in

that effort. This group became the nucleus for the religious Congregation of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1833 under the leadership of Caroline. Caroline became Theresa, a name change indicating a new start, common practice among religious of that day. Theresa believed deeply in the importance of education for women if the family was to become strong. Others joined her for the same reason. Their schools spread to the small towns and rural places where resources were the poorest and where people were left out of systems.



Portrait of SSND Foundress, Blessed Theresa Gerhardinger

When the sisters were asked to start a school in America in 1847, they followed the German immigrants to the farms and rural places in the country. Here they taught boys as well as girls in the parish schools developed by these German immigrants. Many German people settled in Minnesota, Iowa, North and South Dakota, Wisconsin, Montana and Washington. School Sisters of Notre Dame, from its first Provincial Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, responded to invitations from the small towns of Mankato, Minnesota and St. Donatus, Iowa in 1865 and to Hokah, Minnesota in 1867.

The years that followed found many farm girls also joining these sisters in this important work in other small town communities. They caught the spirit of these hearty pioneers and learned to appreciate their love of the land and the beauty of its waters, good soils and trees. These hard working frugal people, with their simple lifestyles and faith-filled spirituality, believed in the importance of strong families and cohesive communities.

In 1910 the Catholic Leadership in Mankato, Minnesota, invited the School Sisters of Notre Dame to start a school on land at the top of a Hill in the northern end of the city. Four men would give the sisters 50 acres of land including the hillsides for that purpose. When Mother Marianne, from Milwaukee, came to visit the site, she was overwhelmed by the beauty she saw as she looked at the hills and the valley below. She agreed to send sisters to start a school and accepted the gift of land for the school and living quarters for the sisters. Plans were made immediately to begin

building. The school was opened in 1912 and dedicated to Mary under the title of Our Lady of Good Counsel. That Hill would become Good Counsel Hill from then on to the surrounding area. Sisters would move out to other small towns from there to start other parish schools upon the request of pastors and parishioners in the years to come.

## **RURAL LIFE COMMITTEE**

All of this has implications for the Center for Earth Spirituality and Rural Ministry (CESRM) as we fast forward to the 1960s. Sisters continuing to teach in the small towns of southern Minnesota would gather together whenever possible to help each other respond to the particular needs of farm children. Curricula was examined to make sure rural cultures were included and celebrated. Sisters shared ways to involve parents with the educational process and to make sure good study habits were developed.

These sisters became known as the Rural Life Committee in the Mankato Province. They immersed themselves in learning what was happening to farm families as agriculture changed. They called on experts to better understand the issues involved and what could be done to counter the negative effects. Some of those experts came from the National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC) in Des Moines, Iowa, and from the Edwin V. O'Hara Rural Ministry Institute directed by Dr. Bernard Evans at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota.

It became clear after some years that a more organized effort was needed. That was what prompted the Rural Life Committee to propose to the Mankato Province community in the early 1990s to free two sisters to study the feasibility of having a presence in some rural area in the Winona Diocese, preferably where a cluster of small parishes was located. (The Mankato Provincial headquarters is located within the Diocese of Winona.)



Sisters Mary Tacheny (left) and Kathleen Storms (right) were appointed by the Provincial Council to study the feasibility of SSND presence in rural Minnesota, which led to the creation of the Center for Earth Spirituality and Rural Ministry.

After many months of discussion, clarification, setting up a chain of accountability, consensus had been reached and the proposal was approved by the Provincial Council along with the two sisters selected as co-Directors: Sister Kathleen Storms and Sister Mary (Mark) Tacheny. Sister Mary had just spent 15 years with the MN Catholic Conference as educational coordinator for the Rural Life Directors of the six Catholic dioceses in Minnesota. S. Kathleen came from experiences in vocation and formation of religious and priests, had exceptional organizational skills, and knew many of the sisters and clergy in the state. Both grew up on a farm and had a variety of teaching and administrative experiences in their backgrounds. Both were members of the Rural Life Committee.

## **CESRM Beginnings**

Sisters Kathleen and Mary arrived at Good Counsel in July of 1994 and were given living and office space in Scheid Hall. The first months were spent equipping and organizing the space as well as becoming acquainted with the sisters on the Hill and their routines. Then came planning the strategy for the work of the proposal with the Rural Life Committee acting as Advisory Committee.

It was decided that the directors soak in as much of the culture of the diocese as they could by meeting with people in their home turf. They gathered clusters of parishioners with their pastors in this very rural diocese for listening sessions. Parishioners spoke openly about their experience of farming and living in a rural community and parish, their relationships with other farm and town neighbors as well as the difficulties they faced economically.

The directors also met with Church leaders from a variety of denominations. They met with religious sisters, with agricultural specialists at Research Stations, with Farm Conservation Services, the Farm Credit Agency and local Department of Natural Resources (DNR) offices. They became acquainted with non-profit organizations in the area, primarily the Land Stewardship Project, MN Food Association, The MN Project, and the MN Farm Advocate Program. They met with the leadership of the MN Institute for Sustainable Agriculture at the University of Minnesota, the Technical College Ag Department in Mankato, the Farmers Union and Nat'l Farmers Organizations.

The more they listened, the more it became clear that many things were causing changes in farm structures: economic instability, industrialization of agriculture, disruption in the rural community due to farm foreclosures, and environmental damages to the land and water. The all-important strength of neighborliness was eroding. Commodity programs favored large farms over smaller ones. Gradually more and more people were leaving the land. With people

leaving the land, schools and parishes were closing. Social shiftings were happening more and more. In fact, rural people were experiencing the gradual deterioration of the social fabric of their communities. The idea of a rural center somewhere among small parishes no longer seemed like a wise idea.

Questions from a farmer at one of the listening sessions gave Kathleen and Mary further doubt. "Are you sisters farming the land at Good Counsel? Do you use chemicals? What are you going to do with your land? Are you gardening? Is it good land? Any erosion problem on those hillsides?" Driving back to Mankato that night found Kathleen and Mary somewhat stunned as they seriously pondered the many questions the farmer had for them.

Two other incidents within the next weeks added further to the questions of the farmer. A seven to eight-inch rain fell within a short period of time that did significant erosion damage to the hillsides. A phone call came from one of the residents of the Thompson Ravine community who lived close to the old road leading up to Good Counsel. "Did Good Counsel have any plans to take care of the erosion of soil from your hills into our back yards?"



Aerial view of Good Counsel Campus. The ravine road, which runs down hill from Campus to Thompson Ravine Rd and was the site of erosion issues, can be seen in the right foreground.

## **NEW DIRECTION**

It became clear to the Directors and to the Rural Life Committee that setting up a Center somewhere else and not addressing the land issues on the Hill was not a good idea. After many meetings and discussion for a number of months, the Rural Life Committee changed the proposal "to study the feasibility of setting up a Center on Good Counsel Hill" and presented it to the Provincial leadership. This was a major change with many implications for the Order. Leadership was reluctant, and rightly so. It would cost both resources and personnel. Sisters on the Rural Life Committee continued doing careful planning and consulting with others. They became more and more convinced that a Center was important. After many months of deliberation, approval for a Center was given by the Provincial Assembly and Provincial Council. CESRM was born on March 24, 1996, with Sisters Kathleen Storms and Mary Tacheny named Co-Directors.

The founding of a Center like CESRM was happening rather frequently among communities of religious orders in the United States and Canada. They were having similar discussions about their land use and care. Leadership in the communities were discussing these ideas with each other at gatherings of members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) organization. Sisters of Earth, a national organization, was founded to share ideas and give

support to one another. Sisters seriously studied Thomas Berry's writings and attended conferences on "The Universe Story." S. Dorothy Olinger SSND, from the Mankato Province, edited a major book of writings on care of Earth. The short articles by a variety of authors was popular and was widely read and studied by sisters.

A land assessment of Good Counsel Hill guided the activities of the Center from then on. The mission was defined as "enabling all of us to become more mindful of the intimate connection of all relationships: with God, with all human beings and with Earth." They would do this by "practicing reverence for all creation on Good Counsel Hill, by supporting rural parish communities and those who minister there, and by working with other people and organizations who struggle to keep land and people together."



A 1920's postcard showing the growth of the SSND community on the Hill.

The Earth Committee and the Directors decided early on what principles would guide the work of the Center. It was important to build relationships among the sisters, staff and the broader community. Upper most in the minds of the group was to help all understand the responsibility we all have to care for our own land on the Hill, that we need to be attentive to the needs of the land. We called ourselves to be collaborative. That meant we simply could not go it alone. We needed to join with other like-minded individuals/organizations and learn from them. Open communication would help us gain the support of others. Above all, we needed to be accountable to our own community of sisters as well as be faithful to our commitments. Evaluations along the way would be necessary. The challenges called for humility and for a willingness to learn.

## STARTING PROJECT

To help all of the sisters as well as the laity in the area to better understand the connection between care of Earth and our spiritual response, S. Paula Gonzalez, a Sister of Charity, was invited to lead a weekend conference entitled *Reflections For An Ecological Age*. More than 200 sisters and laity participated in prayer, study and reflection on September 20-22, 1996 in the Education Center. Paula's emphasis was learning from the earth. "I have become passionately committed to nudging the world toward the re-discovery that the entire Universe is holy ground and that we humans are a part of nature and not over it." It was exactly what all needed to hear at the start of the Center.



This SSND archival photo from 1945 shows Sisters shucking corn outside at the Mankato Campus.

## GARDENS

Gardening had long been a tradition at Good Counsel. From the earliest days in 1912, plans were made to have gardens, much as ordinary families did. Vegetable and fruit gardens were a necessity for that early community to sustain itself during Summer and Fall. In addition preserving foods through canning (and freezing in later years) brought the garden produce to the community through the winter months as well.

As the community grew, the building site also grew to gain living and office space for the growing community and a school. Less space was used for gardening.

Sisters who were full-time gardeners were growing old; younger sisters became teachers in schools all over the geographic territory making up the Mankato Province. The changes in the food production system adversely affecting rural communities also slowly made a difference in how food was supplied to the SSND community on the Hill as well.

When Sisters Kathleen and Mary arrived on the Hill to begin their study in 1994, only a few sisters were gardening in plots south of the Red Barn. Sisters Kathleen and Mary joined them, producing enough food for themselves, canning and freezing foods for the winter months as well. As they gardened they soon learned that the deer loved the gardens too, just as the sister gardeners had seriously warned. Kathleen and Mary could also see that the little Red Barn was badly in need of repair. Additional requests for a garden plot were also coming from sisters, members of the staff and other lay folks in the Mankato area.

When the Center was approved by the Provincial Council in the Spring of 1996, and became the Center for Earth Spirituality and Rural Ministry (CESRM), it soon became clear that serious planning needed to happen. Once the gardens were put away for the winter of '96-'97, Sisters Kathleen and Mary started plans for two garden-related projects: study the possibility of an electric fence around the garden plots south of the Red Barn and decide what to recommend for the future of the barn.

The DNR had a model 7-wire electric fence that had a proven record of keeping out deer and smaller animals. Permission was given by the Council to cover the cost of the fence by a matching grant. The DNR assisted the maintenance crew in getting the fence up in June of '97. It was deemed a success as it kept out the deer and most other small animals. It is kept in repair and gets "put up" every Spring by the staff groundskeeper and maintenance crew since then.



Sisters Kathleen and Mary with apples harvested from the Good Counsel Orchards.



LEC's iconic Big Red Barn, in the midst of restoration repairs in 1997. This project was funded through a donation from the Kierlin Family Foundation to honor Sister Sabina Kierlin, an avid and dedicated gardener on the Hill.

## BARNS

Two barns had been built on Good Counsel Hill much earlier. The smaller **Red Barn**, located north of the water tower, was part of a small farm site before the acreage was bought by SSND. The barn had been used for young cattle for a number of years and was mostly empty when Sisters Kathleen and Mary arrived. Stanchions and gutters were still in place. Flooring was crumbling and the northeast corner of the foundation was sinking. Windows and doors were in poor shape. It was presently used to store equipment for those who gardened south of the barn. But it had been on the property for a long time and was loved by the sister gardeners because it offered a small space for a little lunch when they took a break. It needed repair if it was going to be saved. Some sisters felt it was worth repairing; others thought it should be torn down. A thorough study was made with help from a few lay experts. The committee concluded it was worth repairing. Leadership decided to go ahead with the repair and asked Kathleen and Mary to find the money to do so.

Sister Sabina Kierlin was one of the early, beloved sisters who worked many years in the gardens on the Hill. She was often seen bringing the produce from the gardens to the main kitchen in one of her special garden carts. (Two of those special carts, now restored, continue to grace the front entrance of the main building. Groundskeeper Darla Frost fills them each Spring with a beautiful arrangement of plants.)

Kathleen and Mary decided to contact the Kierlin Family Foundation for a grant to restore the barn in honor of Robert Kierlin's aunt, S. Sabina Kierlin. They approved the idea and asked for a proposal which would include an estimated cost of the project. The proposal was developed for the renovation of the Red Barn along with strengthening the roadway leading up to the barn, a curving walkway to the gardens and a gazebo close by. The proposal was sent to the Kierlin Family Foundation in early 1997 and, to the delight of all, was approved in March of 1997 for the complete renovation of the barn, including the roadway the curving walkway and nearby gazebo by the Kierlin Foundation for stock totaling roughly \$130,00 to honor Sister Sabina.

Plans were finalized and the renovation and repair took place during the Summer and early Fall of 1997. The bottom floor has ample room for the storage of all garden equipment. It also houses an old wood storage container used for storing feed by the Prbylla Family of Mankato, one of the previous owners of that land and barn. Lois Prbylla present family member was grateful the sisters wanted to keep it as part of the barn. It is used to store the watering cans. The upper floor was fully equipped as a meeting space for the gardeners when workshops for them are arranged.

Dedication of the beautifully repaired Red Barn took place on October 11, 1997 with the Kierlin family, S. Sabina, now confined to a wheelchair, and sisters present for the occasion. A group of women from Northfield honored SSND with a two-week photographic display of women farmers in the upper level of the barn.

With garden plots fenced for protection from animals and the Red Barn repaired and restored, it was time to take gardening more seriously. More garden plots were prepared and the planting of a small raspberry patch and an asparagus bed contributed to this desire.

Co- Directors Lisa Coons and S. Kathleen Mary Kiemen, (2003-2016) turned the gardens into a whole new level of development. After more



Sister Sabina Kierlin (above) and her iconic green produce cart (left). Sister Sabina's carts still grace the small, decorative flower garden in front of the Big Red Barn honoring her legacy and dedication to the garden space on the Hill.



This photo of the newly christened Kierlin Gardens, was taken in the late 1990's, some time after the completion of restoration of the barn and renovation of the grounds.

The electric fencing, originally installed in 1997 by SSND maintenance workers with assistance from the DNR, is still in use at the gardens in 2025. The rhubarb patch in the foreground is also still there, growing away almost 30 years later at the southernmost edge of the Gardens.

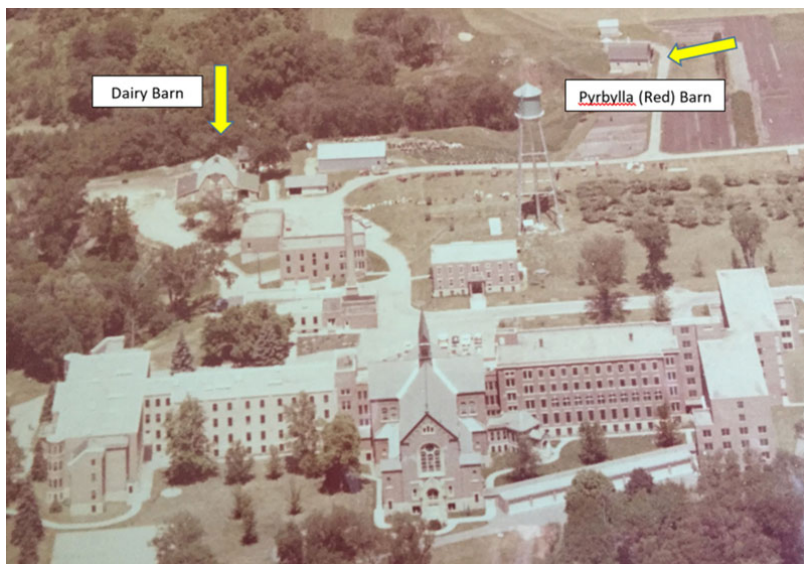
people were requesting a space for a garden, including newly arrived immigrants and refugees, Lisa and Kathleen Mary turned the space into the Community Garden it is today. Garden plots North of the Red Barn were developed and the electric fence and water stations were added to cover that area as well. It was open to anyone who wanted to garden.

Today, Summer of 2018, under Director Laura Peterson, there now are 220 plots 10'x10' covering 3 acres of land. Some 90+ gardeners use these plots, four of which are worked by volunteers for the local food shelf in town. A part of the space is set apart for a Children's Garden. A fee is paid by those who can afford it. Tools are available for use and are stored in the red barn. No motorized cultivators or chemicals are allowed. Water stations are available. Compost and mulch are available. Gardeners are required to care for their plot and clean it up in Fall. The fencing is taken down for the winter months. Deer return eagerly to get what remains of the crop. Among today's gardeners are immigrants and refugees from Palestine, Iraq (Kurds), South Sudan, Nigeria, Kenya, Vietnam, Russia and Cambodia.

The second barn on the premises was simply called the **Dairy and Butchering Barn**. Located on the Northwest corner of the main building site, it was built sometime before 1916, part of Mother Isidore's belief that the sisters needed to be able to sustain themselves by raising their own animals for food.



The Community Gardens grew into the vibrant entity we recognize today under the leadership of CESRM Co-Directors from 2003 - 2016 Sister Kathleen Mary Kiemen (left) and Lisa Coons (right), pictured here with environmental activist Vandana Shiva.



Historic areal view of Good Counsel Hill, showing the location of both the Dairy Barn, which was demolished in 1999 and The Pyrbylla Barn which is now more commonly referred to as the Big Red Barn.

Because the barn was used mostly for storage at the time Sisters Kathleen and Mary arrived, and was in poor condition, the Provincial Council asked Sisters Kathleen and Mary to evaluate its condition with the help of some knowledgeable people from the area. This group decided that to repair the building would be too costly. After removing everything valuable, the barn was demolished on June 16, 1999 under the watchful eyes and heavy hearts of Roman Haefner, long and faithful employee, and many sisters.

### **EROSION CONTROL**

Sisters Kathleen and Mary knew they had to do something to address the erosion problem on the Hill. They needed informed help and went to the local office of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and sought advice from its staff. Kathleen and Mary had one goal: to set up a plan for addressing the erosion issues. They found the DNR staff extremely interested and helpful. Together they walked the acres on the Hill. Gradually the plan took shape. It was decided that some things could be done immediately and others with more planning in order to address the problem. The immediate task was to do something to slow up the run-off from the hills.

After consultation with the Groundskeeper, it was decided to change the mowing policy on the whole campus by staying a few feet away from the edges of the hills with the mower. Adding perennials and grasses to these edges

where necessary would help soak up the rains. In addition, it was decided to plan the process for changing the three fields of row crops into prairies with long-rooted grasses and perennials. A local group of Prairie enthusiasts and the DNR helped bring it to reality. Once the prairie plantings got started, hundreds of trees and shrubs were added some distance from the edges of the hills to help keep the water from reaching the ravines. The group urged less usage of cement and asphalt as well.

On-going plans to address the ravines themselves proved to be a bigger challenge. An early assessment of Hill lands revealed seven problem areas, each with its own character, that needed attention. Two areas by the cemetery got our attention first because graves were in danger of being washed away in one place and a major drainage pipe was doing a great deal of damage in another. Each needed a specific correction and they got it.

The two worst ravines next to each other occurred by the old road—the two guilty of eroding into the yards of our Thompson Road neighbors. The DNR local office helped set up the procedure for correcting the problem. Since it was a major troublemaker, this site got tackled next.

It so happened that a contractor at a major construction site nearby needed to get rid of multiple loads of clay and top soil. He heard we needed soil and clay for a ravine problem and offered to give us multiple loads of it. He also agreed to use his equipment to lengthen and level out the slope of the ravine. Some 200 truckloads of clay and soil were then brought into the site with less cost per load than the going rate, thanks to a local trucking firm. It was a great swap. The generosity of the contractor and the trucking firm enabled us to tackle a major hillside erosion problem next to our neighbors. The contractor in turn found a place for his precious clay and soil.

It took some weeks to get the large culverts replaced and the rest of the site ready so that hundreds of grass plugs could be added with the promise of developing deep roots to hold the soil and clay in place. Eco-fiber was stapled in place over the plantings June 29, 2000, to further insure that the soil would stay in place until the more than 700 grass plugs took root. Several cost-share grants helped with costs.



The Good Counsel Prairie, located just north of the Community Gardens, pictured here during a Monarch Tagging Class in August 2022.

Because of costs, three additional erosion problem areas would be done over the next few years. Two sites were in the area across from the maintenance garage, and the last one on the hill south of St. Joseph Hall. Major help came from the DNR and Soil Conservation Service with good plans for each that could help keep the drainage under control.

Each year more things were done to keep run-off from happening: more planting of perennials with the help of Master Gardeners, mowing grass without going to the edges of hills, encouraging natural growth of shrubs and grasses in erosion prone areas. All efforts were made to keep the rains from washing down hillsides.

**EARTH ALMANAC**  
SSND CENTER FOR EARTH SPIRITUALITY AND RURAL MINISTRY  
Good Counsel Hill, Mankato, Minnesota  
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**NEW BEGINNINGS**

This is the first issue of the **EARTH ALMANAC**, a quarterly information piece to keep you current about the activities of the SSND Center for Earth Spirituality and Rural Ministry. It will be sent with the Currently mailings. We see it also as a way to be accountable to the province.

**NEW DEFINITIONS**

We as a province are embarking on a new and exciting venture of establishing the **SSND Center for Earth Spirituality and Rural Ministry**. It is fitting that as we begin we share operative definitions to:

- gain clarity
- set parameters
- build ownership

The feasibility study of the Rural Life Project led the Reverence for All Creation/Rural Life Committee and the two of us doing the research to broaden and change our idea of what a response to rural people would look like.

*please study the Earth Committee proposal attached to this page. This is what was presented to the March, 1996 Assembly and gives a clear outline of rationale, objectives and possible action plans for the new Center.*

A few definitions may help us to know the scope of the new direction:

**CENTER:** We use this word more as a concept rather than a specific place. We do not intend to take over or oversee the Education Center. Rather, we hope to collaborate with the Education Center staff in sponsoring workshops and retreats that would support goals of the Center for ongoing earth education and support for rural ministry.

As the proposal indicates, the short and long range care of Hill gardens and land is part of an effort to care for this Sacred Trust.

**EARTH SPIRITUALITY:** Also enclosed with this first

Inaugural issue of the Earth Almanac from May 1996. An archive of past Earth Almanac issues can be found at the Living Earth Center website: [www.livingearthcentermn.org](http://www.livingearthcentermn.org)



## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Actions under all three of CESRM's goals were guides in fulfilling other commitments as well: retreats, creating a newsletter to keep in touch with farmers and others we had met in our first meetings, setting up discussion groups for farmers, creating spiritual helps for parishes, increasing the number of gardens and gardeners, finding and training volunteers, applying for and working with several AmeriCorps members as interns, recruiting and assisting Master Gardeners with perennial plantings of flower beds around the Hill, meetings with collaborators of all kinds, keeping communication open as much as possible.

By 2003 Sisters Mary and Kathleen were ready to pass the torch on to others. S. Mary Beck, SSND, teamed with S. Kathleen Storms for one year. Mimi Hottinger and Sisters Kay Fernholz and Jeanne Wingenter kept things moving and developing for two years as part-time directors. It became apparent to the Rural Life Committee that the project needed more steady full-time consideration. The Provincial Council agreed.

S. Kathleen Mary Kiemen came on as Director on May 1, 2005, with Lisa Coons joining her some months later as Co-Director. Over a period of eleven years, these two women brought new expertise and new followers, strengthened the educational programs, developed the gardens into a strong Community Garden, strengthened advocacy efforts and with the

Earth Committee started the annual Earth Conference before Lisa Coons' untimely illness prevented her from continuing. She resigned November 1, 2016 and died in March of 2017. S. Kathleen Mary continued in the position until a discernment process was organized and then resigned.

Discernment by Provincial leadership with members of the Earth Committee and CESRM Advisory Committee came to the decision to apply for 501c3 status so that donations could be received and accounted for. School Sisters of Notre Dame would continue as Sponsors. A Board of Directors was formed and the process developed for finding a new Director. Laura Peterson was hired as Director in the Spring of 2017.



Co-Director Lisa Coons, teaching a Sprouts Pre School Gardening Class, circa 2007 in the Children's Garden plot in the Community Garden.

Sister Mary Tacheny, SSND  
Prepared for the Board of Directors  
Summer 2018