

**AN INTERVIEW
WITH SARAH FLINT, CREATION CARE FELLOW,
ST PETER'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH,
FERNANDINA BEACH**

Continued

Tell us about creation care at St Peter's Episcopal Church, Fernandina. What are the key elements of this work and how do you integrate it into the life of the parish?

SF: At St. Peter's, we have a unique model where a benefactor in the congregation approached our rector and offered to fund conservation/creation care related programming. This was early in 2023. Together they decided that funding a 2-year full-time person for education, programming and projects within the parish would have the greatest impact. I happened to live a mile and a half from the church and had experience and passion for Creation Care, so for me this job has been a dream come true. We've found ways to weave creation care into all aspects of parish life, especially worship, learning, and service.

In my first year our big project was installing a 90-panel solar array on our education building, as well as offering a couple dozen learning and service opportunities. This year we've been working on establishing a Cooling Center to keep our city's vulnerable citizens safe during extreme heat, we're planning a meditation garden featuring native plants, multi-sensory elements and handicap accessibility, and we're working on a campus sustainability plan.

Tell us a bit about the sustainability element of creation care at St Peter's.

SF: When I arrived at St. Peter's, I was very pleased to see the church already used reusable plates, coffee mugs and flatware for food service, and we already recycled. Since then, we installed a 90-panel solar array on our education building, and a higher efficiency air conditioning system with better controls to adjust according to whether or not people are using the space. We also added metal cups to the reusable dishware. [Side note - "Refill Nassau FL" is a great campaign from Keep Nassau Beautiful where we get recognition on their website for using these cups.] Our new plan will address making suggestions about sustainability practices for people renting space, considering energy efficiency with appliance purchases,

strategies for reducing electricity use, and suggestions for more sustainable groundskeeping practices.

What part does education play in creation care at St Peter's? What is happening there on that front?

SF: I've lost count of how many educational programs we've offered over the last couple of years! We've brought in several speakers from local conservation organizations, and they've provided lectures in our Wednesday night programming or after church on Sunday. We've also shown movies. Lectures and movies are a wonderful way to provide education without a large amount of preparation for our church leaders, and they bring people in from the community.

In addition, I've taught a number of classes in person and over Zoom, sometimes starting at 7AM and sometimes starting at 7PM. Currently we're offering a nine-session curriculum from The Episcopal Church called, "*Love God, Love God's World.*" I'm always striving for ways to have something for everybody. This includes looking for settings to teach the youth and children. Kids seem to love learning about creation. At my home church, I often teach a science rotation during Vacation Bible School. It's wonderful to see how much learning about God's natural world engages the students.

How is St Peter's interacting with other churches and within the local community in reference to creation care?

SF: We are very lucky to have a wonderful Ecumenical Clergy Group in Fernandina Beach, so many of our educational offerings and events have been advertised in our partner churches. In honor of St. Francis Day last fall, we sponsored a whole weekend of ecumenical events called, "*Whales to Worms and Everything in Between.*" We started with a movie on Friday night called, "*The Last of the Right Whales,*" and a retired NOAA scientist who worked in whale conservation was on hand to answer questions after the film. [NB This is a reference to the North Atlantic Right Whales. Back in the whaling days they were named for being the 'right' whale to hunt.]

Then, on Saturday morning we offered a composting workshop, and finally on Sunday afternoon the clergy group officiated a brief outdoor worship service and a blessing of the animals. The pet blessing is a huge hit every year. More recently we co-sponsored a hosting site for *Blessed Tomorrow's National Faith and Climate Forum* with the local Methodist and Congregational churches.

You told me a bit about the new garden under construction at St Peter's. That all sounds like fun and very attractive. Please tell us about it and how it fits into the scheme.

SF: We are very excited about the Meditation Garden at St. Peter's! We are converting an overgrown community garden to create an outdoor sanctuary as a gift to the community. Most of the plants will be native, so we will be able to educate about the importance of growing native plants for the pollinators and other wildlife, and the whole "right plant, right place" philosophy that minimizes the need for extra watering, herbicides, pesticides, and artificial fertilizers.

We also plan to incorporate elements for all our different senses, and a handicap parking space along with an accessible path to a hardscape area, so everyone will be able to enjoy this special, sacred space. Another reason this project has been very special is the amount of support we've received from outside of the church with experts jumping in to help, and as a "thank you" the city gifted us with some funds for native plants after we pulled out several wheelbarrows of an invasive plant.

How is creation care woven into St Peter's worship life?

SF: We've managed to weave creation care into Sunday morning worship in both large and small ways. Sometimes we've just included a special prayer during the Prayers of the People. I particularly remember prayers for the right whales during the season when they were calving off our shores. I also was given the honor to preach at a Creation Sunday service during the Season of Creation (September 1 - October 4). And we've had special outdoor worship, including a Rogation liturgy during Earth Month (April), and the Blessing of the Animals near St. Francis Day. We even held a blessing of our solar panels when we celebrated their installation. There are lots and lots of resources for worship during Earth Month and the Season of Creation. And there are great resources from the Center for Spirituality in Nature (<https://www.centerforspiritualityinnature.org>) for organizing "Spirituality in Nature Groups." For Creation Sunday worship, it seems to be easier to incorporate it into the Season of Creation, since April is usually still Lent. And in the fall, it coincides perfectly with the larger theme of stewardship. Honestly, there are opportunities to include creation elements in worship every Sunday throughout the year!