The Garden
at Bethany Place

Partnering with the land God entrusted to us, and with the community, to educate, heal and transform all who visit

The Episcopal Diocese of Kansas
Spring 2021
Proposed design for the Garden at Bethany Place
Our vision

The Garden at Bethany Place is a key element of the overall plan for Bethany House and Garden, a new initiative of the Episcopal Diocese of Kansas. The historic Bethany House will serve as the center for the garden and associated ministries.

Working in collaboration with neighborhood partners, including Topeka Center for Advanced Learning and Careers, Grace Cathedral, Topeka High School, the Midtown Community Services Board, Meadows Elementary School, Williams Fine Arts and Science Magnet School, and K-State Research and Extension, we are using three acres of diocesan land to create a garden space designed to educate, heal and transform people through interaction with creation.

We are part of the Nature Sacred network of more than 130 greenspaces across the United States that infuse nature into under-resourced communities, schools and hospitals to foster mindful reflection, restore mental health and strengthen communities.

The Garden will include a prairie and pollinator garden to restore some of the land to its native prairie grasses and flowers that will provide a space where pollinators can thrive and school children can interact and learn; a culinary garden to provide produce to the community through our partnership with West Side Baptist Church’s Food and Vegetable Pantry and distribution directly to our neighbors; and a meditation garden, which will include a rain garden and deep-rooted plants to capture storm water and reduce water pollution, teaching best water practices.

Throughout the Garden, guests will be invited into places of rest, retreat and contemplation.

Plans also call for an outdoor chapel to honor the legacy of an historically Black Episcopal church, St. Simon’s, that was located a few blocks away until it was closed in 1964.

The Garden construction should begin in late summer 2021 and will be done in phases, if necessary. The generosity of donors will help make all this possible.

Our legacy

This land originally was home to the Kanza, or Kaw, People, indigenous inhabitants of much of what is now the State of Kansas. They were known to white explorers of the early 19th century as the Wind People.

The land for the Garden at Bethany Place is part of a 20-acre parcel given in 1860 by the founders of Topeka to the Episcopal Diocese of Kansas to build a school for girls, which came to be know as the College of the Sisters of Bethany. The school operated on the property from 1870 until 1928. Our focus on education at the Garden retains our ties to the original purpose.

Portions of the original land now house Grace Cathedral on the north and Topeka High School on the south and west, as well as three diocesan buildings.
The prairie and pollinator garden will be the first garden one enters from the east side.

Species of native prairie grasses and plants will form much of this garden area.

Plants that attract butterflies and bees will play a role in supporting endangered pollinators, which are critical to the success of flowering plants and food crops.
A prairie and pollinator garden

When 19th-century settlers first crossed eastern Kansas they encountered millions of acres of waving grasses — the tallgrass prairie. But between 1830 and 1900 much of the tallgrass prairie disappeared, plowed under by settlers as the region was colonized. The land remained but the grass was gone, plowed under to reveal the rich, black, fertile soil below that has sustained farmers for generations.

To honor the heritage of the land that the diocese has held in trust since 1860, we will transform the lawn at Bethany Place to include many native prairie plant species, including Indian grass, little bluestem, sideoats grama, purple prairie clover, prairie coneflower and wooly verbena. Prairie plants are drought resistant and help to purify water and sequester carbon. The biodiversity of prairie is astonishing when seen up-close.

Through this prairie garden we also seek to honor the indigenous Kanza People who first occupied this land.

Children from nearby elementary schools will utilize the Bethany prairie as an outdoor classroom, particularly for curricula involving Monarch butterflies. Students from Meadows Elementary and Williams Magnet Schools will include raising and tagging Monarch butterflies as part of their lessons. The garden will provide them with a nature laboratory where they can engage with the things they are learning in their school classroom.

The prairie garden also is an area for young and old to stretch, play and converse.

The garden also will provide special habitat to attract pollinators that are essential to sustaining flowering plants and food crops. The Garden will hope to encourage mason bees and leafcutter bees, which are of local concern, as well as Monarch butterflies. Kansas is part of what is known as the “Monarch highway,” an area from Minnesota to Texas that runs along the central flyway of the Monarch migration path.

Plant species helpful to them, especially common milkweed and butterfly milkweed, will provide the necessary breeding grounds to help Monarch butterflies thrive. In addition, swamp and poke milkweed will be planted in the meditation and rain garden area.

Pollinators require natural spaces with vegetation and flowering plants in which to live and forage for the pollen and nectar that is their food. American cities, with an abundance of concrete and asphalt surfaces, have reduced the habitat on which pollinators survive.
A series of raised beds will allow people of varying physical abilities and ages to care for the vegetables and herbs planted in the culinary garden. In-ground plants also will be part of the garden.

The culinary garden will include a variety of vegetables and herbs that will help feed people and help students from area schools learn how to grow food and use it in cooking. Students also will be among those working in this garden.

An outdoor classroom and community gathering space will be adjacent to the culinary garden.
A culinary garden

Throughout the listening sessions we had with civic leaders, educators, neighborhood groups and others about Bethany House and Garden, all said that a culinary garden should be a top priority.

The culinary garden will be made up of a series of constructed raised beds placed in a geometric configuration, as well as a large area for in-ground planting. The area planted will include herbs, native plants and common food plants, and sustainable practices will be emphasized.

Through partnerships with Topeka Public Schools and Shawnee County’s Topeka Center for Advanced Learning and Careers — a vocational program for high school students — as well as Topeka High School located just feet away, this garden will provide farm-to-table learning for a variety of students and offer real-world experience for both construction and culinary students.

The neighborhood around Bethany Place constitutes a food desert, with little access to fresh fruit, produce or affordable food. In addition, nearly 19 percent of the children enrolled in the local school district live in poverty, and 77 percent of them qualify for free or reduced lunches.

We seek to provide fresh vegetables not only to the residents of the neighborhood around Bethany House and Garden, but we also will partner with nearby West Side Baptist Church to supply fresh produce for its Food and Vegetable Pantry, with the goal of increasing their provision of fresh vegetables from 90 to 120 families.

We also plan to use some of the vegetables and herbs in cooking classes that will be offered in the kitchen of Grace Cathedral, adjacent to the garden.

Because the women who attended the College of the Sisters of Bethany for 58 years often enjoyed picnics on these very grounds, they especially will be remembered in the culinary garden.

Adjacent to the culinary garden will be an outdoor classroom, with benches, that also serves as a community gathering space.
An existing raised terrace area adjacent to Bethany House will be transformed into an outdoor chapel where a variety of groups, including a new community being created through the ministry of Bethany House and Garden, can worship.

The outdoor chapel will be dedicated to St. Simon’s, a Black congregation that was located nearby until it was closed in 1964.
An outdoor chapel

A raised terrace adjacent to Bethany House is the site of what will become a small outdoor chapel that will be dedicated to St. Simon’s Episcopal Church, a Black congregation located a few blocks away that was closed in 1964. We will honor the members of that congregation as part of our call to seek racial justice.

An area next to that space will include seating that not only will serve the chapel but also will provide space where people can gather for outdoor worship, weddings or reunions.

The Reverend Jennifer Allen currently oversees the ministry of Bethany House and Garden as Missioner. As part of her call, she is engaging with the neighborhood and community to bring the love of God in Christ to people who may not have heard that message, or who may be uncomfortable with organized faith traditions.

She often is on the sidewalk near the proposed garden area to offer prayers to anyone who wants them. She has received a grant to create “grace bags” to hand out to those who pick up meals through Grace Cathedral’s Saturday sandwich ministry. These bags include a variety of personal care items, socks and hats, water and a protein bar, and a card to request prayers. People can place their requests in a box installed on a post near the property’s driveway.

She has begun a weekly Bible study that already has a few regular participants.

Through these efforts, she hopes to develop a new community that will gather for group prayers and liturgy outdoors, centered in the new outdoor chapel.

An ordination service at St. Simon’s, in the 1920s or 1930s
Plants that thrive in shade will be used in the meditation garden and will bring a sense of peace.

The meditation garden will be a quiet space, where prayer and a sense of healing can take place. This garden also will include a rain garden to capture and purify storm water.

In a 1908 photo, Cathedral Dean James P. DeBevers Kaye stands in the flower garden outside the dean’s home. In the background is Wolfe Hall, the main building of the College of the Sisters of Bethany.
A meditation and rain garden

Throughout history people have found gardens to be a place of rest and refreshment, of contemplation and prayer, of renewal and reinvigoration. A special space will be set aside in this project for a meditation garden.

Its location on the northwest corner of the Bethany Place property includes many trees, so this garden will feature plants that grow well in dappled shade. Near this area is where many flowers were grown for the altar at Grace Cathedral (see photo on preceding page).

This will be a quiet area, where prayer and a sense of healing can take place. It will feature a series of small intimate spaces connected by a looping concrete walk, with stepping stones for secondary paths. Parishioners from Grace Cathedral and students at the Bishop Kemper School for Ministry, located in former cathedral space, also will benefit from this special place of prayer and contemplation.

An important special feature of this garden is how it will model best water practices, including a rain garden in its design. The rain garden, along with deep-rooted plants, will help filter pollutants (including oil dirt and brake dust) from the nearby cathedral parking lot. It also will absorb some water into the soil before the rest enters the city stormwater system.

By converting impervious lawn space into gardens, the overall water quality of the area is improved.

We are delighted to be a part of the Nature Sacred network, an organization that for 25 years has worked with more than 130 communities to infuse nature into places where healing is often needed most: distressed urban neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, prisons and more.

Nature Sacred exists to inspire, inform and guide communities in the creation of public green spaces — called Sacred Places — that are bound together by a common goal: to reconnect people with nature in ways that foster mindful reflection, restore mental health and strengthen communities.

The neighborhood around Bethany House and Garden, just a few blocks from downtown Topeka, is multifaceted. Modest family homes, restored grand homes, apartments, halfway houses, a few businesses and several vacant lots are woven together in the urban fabric around our site.

The Garden at Bethany Place will provide the neighborhood with a place where they can find peace and comfort amid the healing power of nature.
More about the project

Here is some general information about the overall garden project:

- The garden will have two entry portals, one on the east side (Polk Street) near Topeka High School, and another on the north side (near the Grace Cathedral parking lot). Each portal will provide a welcoming entry into the garden. When entering from the east, signs will emphasize the history represented by each garden space. When entering from the north, signs will emphasize meditation and other prayer practices as one moves from space to space.

- Interpretative signs not only will guide people through the gardens but also will identify plant species in a way that blends with the habitat.

- The garden will emphasize sustainable practices, from the possibility of collecting rain water to composting on-site, wherever possible.

- Low raised walls will delineate some parts of the garden, and those will be constructed of local limestone, to match the existing buildings and walls that run along the west and south sides of the property.

- Pathways will be made of a variety of materials, as each area requires: concrete, crushed stone and stepping stones.

- The garden has a partnership with the Agatha Amani House, the first safe house for victims of domestic violence near Naivasha, Kenya. Founder and Executive Director Nyakio Kaniu-Lake is a Kansas Episcopalian and a native of Kenya. Agatha Amani House practices permaculture, an approach to land management that emphasizes patterns of landscape, function and species, and places them so they can provide maximum benefit to the local environment. Nyakio is a trained permaculturist who will work with Missioner Jennifer Allen to introduce permaculture practices in these new gardens.

- Planning is underway to create a model for sustainable garden maintenance once it is planted. We hope to have an in-resident coordinator and young adult garden interns who will assist both volunteers and student visitors.
Elements of our past

The land now known as Bethany Place was a gift from the founders of Topeka in 1860 to the months-old Diocese of Kansas to try to lure a girls school, founded by a priest from Maryland, to Topeka from its rival to the east, Tecumseh. The offer worked, and what would become the College of the Sisters of Bethany moved to Topeka. The land itself, however, remained vacant until 1870, when money from a wealthy donor from New York provided a building with dormitories and classrooms, named Wolfe Hall in his honor. Five years later, a laundry and a barn, made of the same native limestone as Wolfe Hall, were built. The barn now is the diocese’s Upton Hall Conference Center, and the laundry now is Bethany House. Growth in students prompted construction of an addition to Wolfe Hall and a new building for younger students to the west, Holmes Hall.

This school, unlike most institutions of higher learning in the state, was exclusively for women. In a time when some women received only a “finishing-school” education, Bethany College stressed academics as well as fine arts. Its music program was especially well-known, sporting more than a dozen pianos for student use.

Bishop James Wise in the early 1920s created the first summer camp for the diocese, with girls staying in the school’s dormitories and boys sleeping in tents pitched on the lawn. Bishop Wise said it might have been the best thing he ever did in his two decades as bishop.

In 1888, land on the north edge of the original 20 acres was given to Grace Church for its new home, where it also was designated the cathedral for the diocese. Financing the school was perennially difficult, from the first bishop of the diocese, Thomas Vail, until the eve of the Great Depression, when the school finally closed in 1928.

A capital campaign begun in the 2010s raised money to remodel the conference center and build new diocesan offices attached to Grace Cathedral, as the cathedral raised its own money for new construction projects. More fully utilizing Bethany Place for spiritual retreats and spiritual direction is intended. Now Bethany House and Garden will restore native species, rededicate resources of education and offer pastoral serenity to space that has been reimagined many times since 1860.

The Bethany Place property as depicted in 1883.
How do you fit into the garden?

This project will require the help of many people in a myriad of ways. We have already forged partnerships with those organizations and friends represented here:

How can you partner with us?

**Donors**

Donors are invited to provide financial capital that will make this project a reality.

The diocese has set aside an initial $50,000, and a variety of grants totalling $49,499 from the Episcopal Church have been received by the diocese in 2019–2020 to support the land development and ministries of Bethany House and Garden.

Bishop Cathleen Bascom is actively seeking donors who understand the vision of caring for creation, education and Topeka’s urban core that Bethany House and Garden represents.

Anyone interested in giving may email her at cbascom@episcopal-ks.org or telephone the diocesan office at (785) 235-9255.

**Volunteers**

Beginning by the summer of 2022, a residential garden coordinator and young adult garden interns will be stationed at Bethany House and Garden, and K-State Extension Master Gardeners hope to partner with us as hands-on guides.

In addition, we seek volunteers of all ages and availability. Join us for whole summer days or a few hours after work or over the lunch hour. Gardeners and trail-keepers of all ages are most welcome. Please contact Bethany Missioner the Reverend Jennifer Allen at jallen@episcopal-ks.org, or call her at (913) 620-7773 for more information.