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NEWS

Faith group goes into the woods for Earth Day

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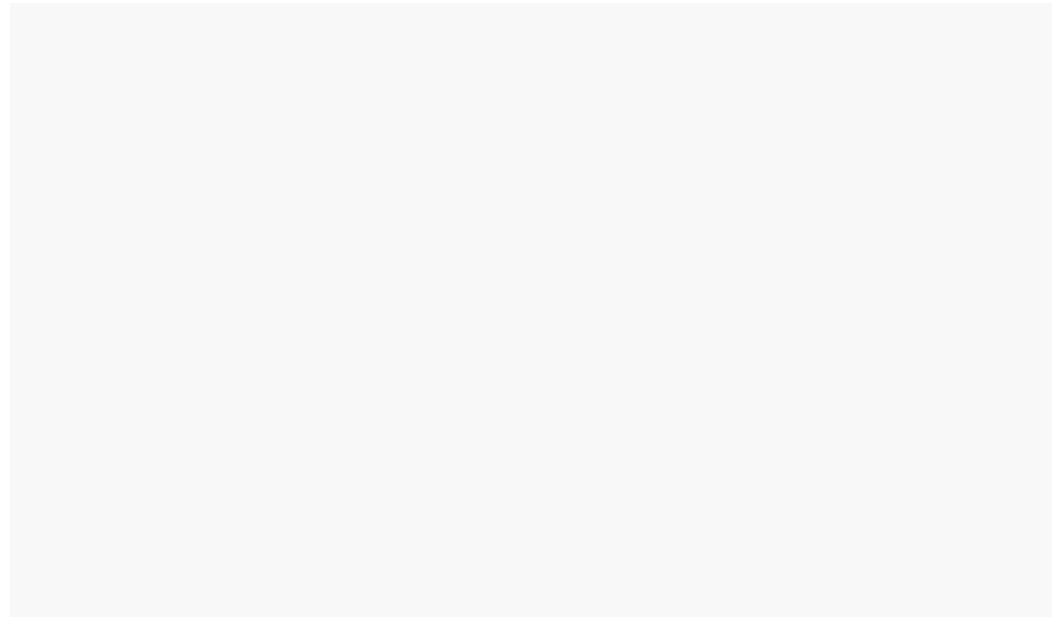
"Fr." Michael Mernaugh, pastor of Anamanchara Faith Community in Crescent Hill, is shown with "Fr." Raymond Schafer, another community leader, at a past Earth Day service at Bernheim Forest. *Provided*

In honor of Earth Day on Friday, a small faith community in Crescent Hill is making plans to go outside its walls and into the woods for a celebration Sunday at Bernheim Forest in Bullitt County.

The "soul friends" at Anamchara Faith Community -- which regularly meets on Sunday evenings at Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church -- will hold an annual Earth Day-related service that will focus on trees this year and "the gifts we receive through trees," said Michael Mernagh, the church's pastor, Mernagh, who goes

by "Father Michael" after being ordained by the Old Catholic Church of America, said they also hope to work with a forester to plant a tree at Bernheim in the name of Anamchara, a Gaelic word for "soul friend."

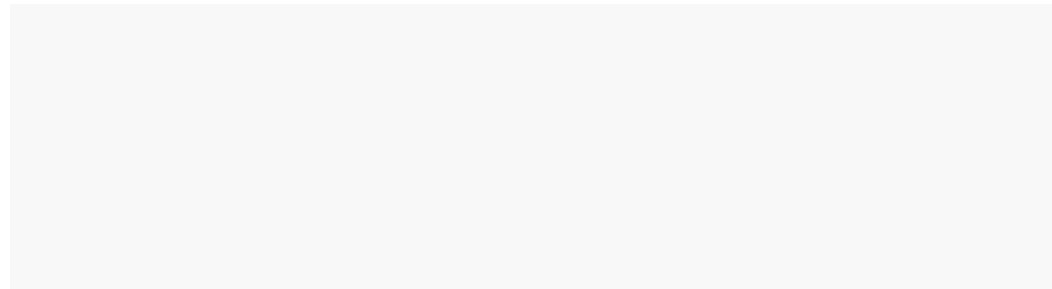
The service theme will be "Trees of Life," and the group will gather in Cull Hollow on Forest Hill Drive and share scripture readings that honor trees. The service is at 10 a.m. at Bernheim, near I-65 on Hwy. 245 at Clermont, and others are welcome. (No pets, please, a flier says).

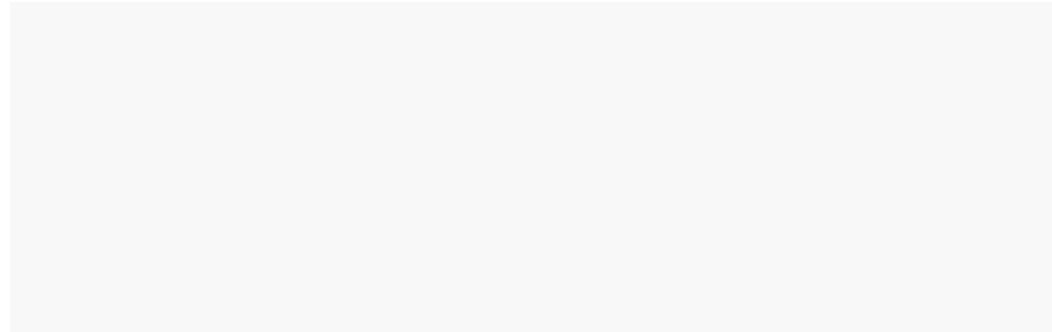


Mernagh cites a Bible passage from the book of Daniel that says, in part, "The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these: I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great . . . Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches."

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The service will mix in some aspects of Native American spirituality and will include a homily by Raymond Schafer, a naturalist who also goes by "Father" and who presides over the Eucharist at the regular 7 p.m. Sunday services. Schafer, also volunteer coordinator at St. John Center for Homeless Men, 700 E. Muhammad Ali Blvd., said the aim is to "connect to the earth" after "getting out of the city and out of the civilized environment." He owns 40 acres in Indiana, and Anamchara gatherings also have been held there.





At Bernheim, participants also will meditate on how they interact with trees. "Do we see them as nuisances to be cut down to make room for more grass, or do we honor trees, plant trees and protect them?" Mernagh asked.

It's not the sort of service that's likely to be held at too many churches, and Anamchara isn't like most churches. In an age of mega-churches, Anamchara is a self-described "tiny" community, founded in 2007, with only about a dozen regular members -- including men and women, straight and gay/lesbian, people of color, married, divorced and single. "We're not about numbers" but rather about spiritual growth, Mernagh said. The community has been described as having a "small-town feel."



Michael Mernaugh, leader of Anamchara Faith Community, stands in front of Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church, where the group meets on Sunday evenings. *Martha Elson/The Courier-Journal*

Mernagh is openly gay and is married to Bryant Spalding, an occupational therapist. But Anamchara "is not a gay church," Mernagh said, and it's not affiliated with the Old Catholic Church or any other religious body, by choice of its members. He has an affiliation with the Holy Cross Old Catholic Diocese of Minnesota in St. Paul, which is separate from the Roman Catholic Church.

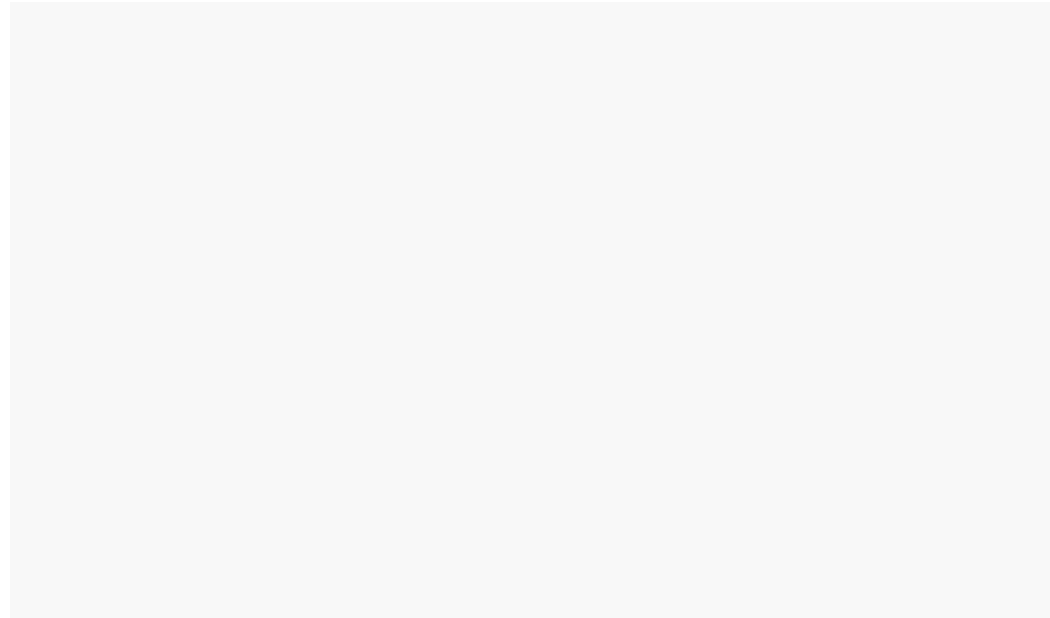
The Anamchara community is Christian and is known for engaging in ancient rituals that are cast in "creative and refreshing ways," Mernagh said. On Christmas Eve, a "Procession of Light" was held and members gathered at the altar for a lighting of the paschal candle and the Eucharist. In another departure from the norm, Mernagh not only led the Christmas Eve service but also played the piano for it, accompanying the cantor at one point on "O Holy Night," because the regular pianist, Todd Hildreth, was absent.

Mernagh is a professional church musician who has played at St. Joseph in Bardstown and St. Albert the Great near Westport Road in Louisville, among many other places, and he was musical director for several years beginning in 1999 at the St. Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology/Archabbey in St. Meinrad, Ind. He currently also is music director at Our Merciful Savior Church at 11th Street and Muhammad Ali Boulevard in west Louisville.

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Mernagh has a B.A. degree in music and philosophy from University of Alberta, Canada and an M.A. in theology with a concentration in liturgy from St. John's University in Minnesota. He also has a certificate in piano performance from the Royal Conservatory of Music/University of Toronto.

On Sunday, the Earth Day also service will feature a procession scented with cedar incense, and participants will encircle a tree to honor it and partake in the Eucharist. The service will finish with a covenant to continue to work for justice, peace and for the preservation and protection of the natural world.



While a service at Bernheim may seem a little off the beaten track, Anamchara member Terian Barnes said she associates the church with going out into the world. "I came here to be filled with a peace and a love and a spirit that I can then take back into the community," she said.

Reporter Martha Elson can be reached at (502) 582-7061 and melson@courier-journal.com. Follow her on Twitter at [@MarthaElson_cj](https://twitter.com/MarthaElson_cj).



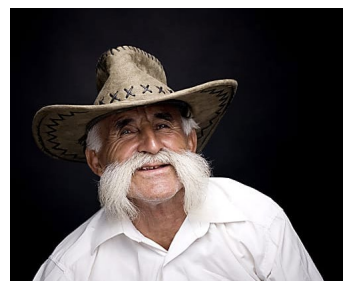
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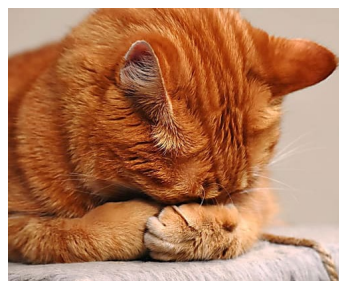
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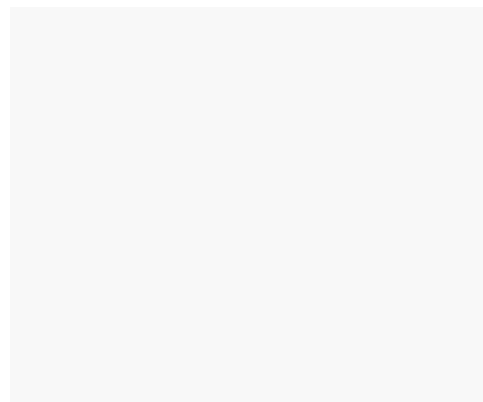
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



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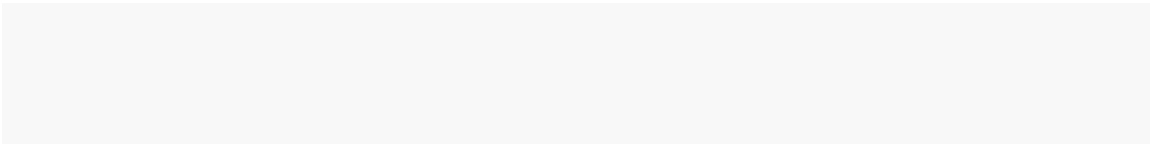
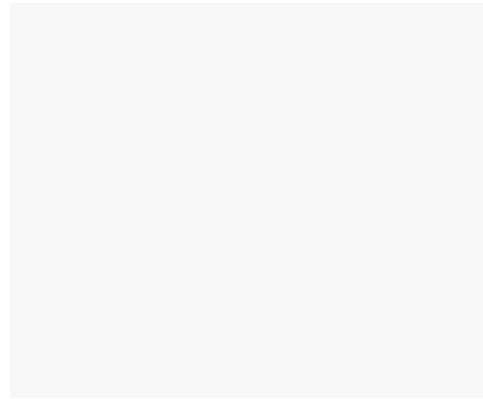
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