

## From Lawn to Prairie

Wisconsin was once covered with prairies—7.5 million acres of tall grass flowing into broad fields dotted with oaks and dappled with wildflowers. With just 13,000 acres left, St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Stevens Point, WI, is restoring prairie land on its own site and is teaching its congregation and community about environmental stewardship in the process.

The church sits on a five-acre site. A large lawn used to cover the land surrounding the building, but the church's Green Team decided to convert the lawn back to prairie as an act of stewardship—not only did members deem mowing the lawn to be a waste of resources, but they also valued the restoration of the land itself. “Churches are big property owners,” said Dennis Yockers, church member. “It is important for us to be stewards of these resources by making sustainable land management choices.”

The church stopped cutting the lawn, and within six weeks, native wildflowers and grasses popped up from the ground. Five years later, the land boasts 45 species of grasses and wildflowers, more than 15 different species of butterflies, and at least eight species of dragonflies. Three birdhouses added as part of a larger birdhousing trails network welcome bluebirds, tree swallows, and chickadees. Ground-dwellers include mice, ground squirrels and cottontail rabbits.

Now the prairie is a teaching tool for church members and for the community. Signs describe plants and prairie wildlife. Articles in the church newsletter teach members about the prairie seasons. A nearby public school uses the land to teach about local ecology. “Not only is it providing a community resource, it also provides a sense of place,” according to Yockers. The connection with the land people feel when walking the prairie has a spiritual component as well.

“When you connect people’s spiritual lives with the land, the concept of stewardship becomes more meaningful.”