

History of the Sacred Grounds

Rod Belshee conceived the idea of Sacred Grounds in 2017, triggered a few years earlier when Bruce Elwood led him to the small patch of endangered milkvetch on the property. A small cadre grew along with the enthusiastic support of the minister. In the Fall of 2019 planning began to involve the Congregation and to see where the concept might take us. The minister spoke of Sacred Grounds from the pulpit, many articles appeared in the monthly and weekly newsletters, Jack Fitzsimmons made beautiful posters, and the first kickoff meeting was held January 9, 2020 with 22 people in attendance. The theme was “Dreaming” and the meeting was structured to collect ideas and dreams from the every attendee and then to see which ideas resonated with the most people. Several Board members were present, and others were kept informed by email. The only Dreaming ground rules were that too many ideas was the right number (for now) and that all Sacred Grounds projects would be self-funded, separate from the operating budget of the church.

The enthusiasm at that first meeting was overwhelming. Many people volunteered their time and donations began to flow in. The leadership team grew to Rod Belshee, Jack Fitzsimmons, Diana Leslie and Hiroshi Yamaguchi. Many activities started, including trimming trees, inventorying our landscaping, installing art, studying architectural drawings, investigating our irrigation system and sketching ideas. Twenty people turned out for our Love the Land event on February 22, removing trash and invasive weeds. Enthusiasm for the Sacred Grounds was extremely high.

On March 9 a second meeting was held inviting the 33 people now engaged in Sacred Grounds. Vikki Porter gifted an amazing glass chalice that she created for the group. We walked the grounds, reviewed the progress and discussed sketches. We planned the major roll-out to the congregation.

The March 22 worship service would center on the Sacred Grounds initiative with the minister speaking to our seventh principle and our spiritual connection to the land. A large event was planned on the patio afterwards that included information posters, sketches of potential projects, and tables staffed with people to explain the concepts and stir up more support. Newsletter articles ran for several weeks, Evelyn Kain created art and poems, Jonathan Fast posted a video on the UUCOD YouTube channel, and a blurb was submitted for the website as well as other promotion. Outreach included UCR Center for Conservation Biology, desert conservation organizations and groups interested in native plants.

The week before March 22, 2020, we closed the building due to the Covid pandemic. The worship service, streamed on an iPhone, still focused on Sacred Grounds but all

other aspects were canceled. The Sacred Grounds leadership team immediately shifted their individual efforts to the higher priority of Staying Connected, and Sacred Grounds was put on the back burner.

In the Winter and Spring of 2020 a number of people found connection with the land and each other by joining weeding parties. That repeated in 2021, and has started up again in the past few weeks as we keep ahead of the invasive species and make space for natives that feed our butterflies and lizards. Others took on watering and otherwise caring for the land while Sacred Grounds remained dormant.

Several people led a small restart of Sacred Grounds in the Spring of 2021, leading to more donations, a plan for enlarging the patio and adding misters, a Celebration Garden and a Garden of Hope. All of these Phase 1 projects were approved by the Board during the summer of 2021. However the Sacred Grounds group felt like we want to first rekindle excitement within the congregation rather than have such changes just appear while the building is empty. We want the full congregation to engage and celebrate.

Sacred Grounds was formally re-started on Earth Day 2022. The Worship service included discussion of the 7th Principle, Dr. Katie Barrows talking about conservation in the Coachella Valley, and a kick-off of Sacred Grounds.

Phase 1 implementation will start in summer or fall of 2022, depending upon volunteers.