

BETHANY LAND INSTITUTE



2024 Annual Report



Dear BLI Family,

On a beautiful fall weekend in November, the USA Board of Bethany Land Institute hosted an Indaba. Indaba is a South African word used to describe a conference of leaders and interested people coming together to discuss important matters, to celebrate and reflect on what has been accomplished, and to look forward to the future. As I prepared my presentations for the Indaba, I began to reflect on the words of Pope Francis from his Encyclical Letter “Laudato Si’ – On Care for our Common Home.” The phrase “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” is a thread that guides the work of BLI. The earth cries out for reforestation of our forests, the land cries out for regeneration of its depleted soil, and the poor cry out for social and economic justice.

At BLI, the restoration work in Lazarus’ Forest has returned water to the forest, birds and small animals have returned to the trees and forest floor, and thousands of trees have been planted that are doing the work of absorbing carbon and cleaning the air. Regenerative agriculture methods are enriching the soil at BLI resulting in abundant harvests. The coming expansion of Martha’s Market and the Community Outreach Program will teach our caretakers, and the community, ways to meet the needs of people living in poverty and bring the poor into flourishing. Bethany Land Institute is a light, showing Uganda and the world how to form leaders for rural transformation and integral ecology.

This is not easy work, but it is joy-filled work. It takes prayer and planning. A new five-year strategic plan has recently been completed. When reviewing the just-completed strategic plan, we stand amazed and humbled that BLI far exceeded its first set of five-year goals. We celebrate our 80 commissioned Caretakers, the 37 Caretaker trainees currently in training, and the anticipated incoming class of 20 Caretaker trainees. We look forward to the engaging in integral ecology pastoral formation through our program for seminarians. We are grateful for our staff who are dedicated to this work, for the students and interns who have come from afar to learn at BLI, for the researchers who evaluate the work of BLI that helps ground us on our pathway forward, for visitors who come to see our work and encourage us, for those who donate to BLI, and those who pray for us. BLI is a family working together to make our common home a better place.

With hope and joy filled hearts let us join in saying, “Laudato si’, mi’ Signore” – Praise be to you, my Lord!

Father Emmanuel

Co-Founder and President



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**All of this shows the urgent need for us to move forward
in a bold cultural revolution.**

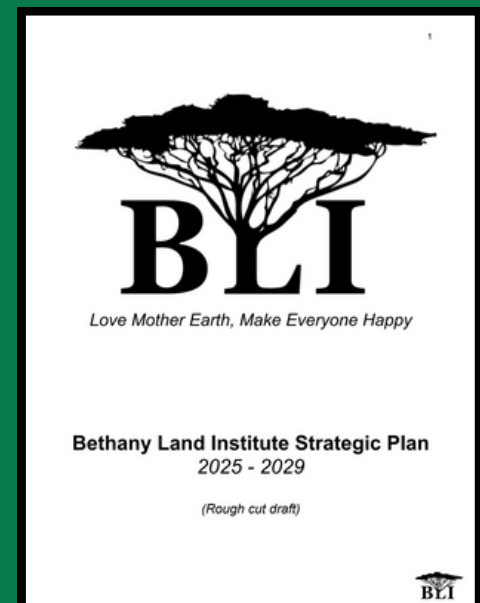
- Laudato Si', #114

Looking Back, Looking Forward: BLI Strategic Planning

The end of 2024 marked a significant milestone for BLI as we officially graduated from our first five-year strategic plan, which ran through 2024, to our new plan running through 2029. To prepare for this milestone, we hosted an important strategic planning workshop in July to both reflect upon our progress to date and also chart a vision for the next five years. Thirty-eight delegates attended the workshop from across the world, including BLI founders, BLI USA board members, current Caretaker trainees, current staff, local officials, and multiple others dedicated to BLI's future.

Our first job was to reflect on our progress to date. Below are some highlights:

- We officially launched the two-year residential Caretaker program and have grown it year after year. The first cohort of eight trainees graduated in 2023. Cohort II, consisting of ten individuals, graduated in 2024. Nineteen individuals are set to graduate in 2025 with another nineteen set to graduate in 2026.
- The boundaries of Lazarus' forest have all been marked and six trails created within the forest for tours, birding, camping, and other recreational activities. Four species of monkeys have returned to the forest along with over 200 species of birds. Over 200,000 trees have been planted to date in reforestation efforts in the forest and beyond.
- We successfully completed Phase I construction. This includes three dormitories (total capacity of 96 trainees), a commons building with a cafeteria and computer lab, a guest house and hostel for visitors, staff housing, and numerous livestock and farming facilities.



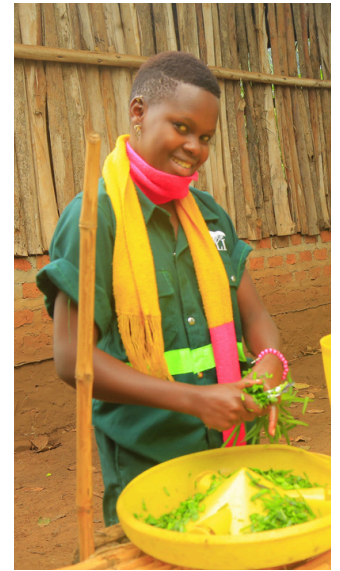
We then turned to the years ahead. For the next five years, we have three overarching visions: (1) BLI shall be a dynamic teaching and research hub for integral ecology; (2) Nandere Parish will serve as a model integral ecology parish; and (3) a vibrant Martha's Market will provide economic sustainability and transform livelihoods. To pursue these visions, we have created more tangible goals for the journey. Here are a few:

- Increase the number of Caretaker trainees per class to thirty-two by 2027, ensuring such trainees come from various villages—including the local Nandere area—across Uganda.
- Produce at least 70% of all food consumed at BLI on our own land by 2029.
- Open an official Lazarus' Forest information center for visitors and researchers by 2027. This center will have classrooms and accommodations for those visiting BLI to learn about the reforestation efforts and impressive biodiversity.
- Ensure ongoing partnerships with at least twenty community groups and thirty-six schools by 2029.

We believe that these goals, along with many others, will enable us to continue pursuing our mission to spread integral ecology through Uganda, with a focus on uplifting local communities and restoring local lands. While we were excited to see how far we have come in the past five years, we are even more excited about where we are heading. We are thankful for everyone who has joined us, and will join us, on this journey toward a better future for all.



Faces of BLI



We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it.

- Laudato Si', #229

38

seminarians trained
at BLI in Summer
2024

80

Total Commissioned
Caretakers to date

75+

attendees at BLI's
inaugural Indaba hosted
near Chicago, IL

700 kg

of beans sold to the local market as a part of
BLI's Martha's Market - BLI continues to
increase its contributions into the local
markets, both institutionally and through its
Caretakers' own harvests

61,650

trees planted in 2024

232,894

trees planted to date

34

piglets born on BLI's
campus this year

Over 30%

of trees planted in
2024 were outside BLI's campus, typically in
partnership with community groups, as BLI
works to spread integral ecology across Uganda

46%

of Caretaker trainees at
BLI in 2024 were women

244

Current acres that
Lazarus' Forest occupies
as BLI continues to
reforest it

203

different species of birds are
currently living in BLI's
Lazarus' Forest - many of
these are local species that
have returned as the forest
continues to return to its
natural state

2024 IN NUMBERS

Approximately

90%

of BLI's goals in its 2020-
2024 strategic plan were
reached

Expanding BLI's Reach: The Pastoral Program

This summer, BLI hosted 38 seminarians for an intensive one-month, integral ecology program on campus. The goal of this pastoral formation program is to equip the seminarians, who will soon become leaders of parishes across Uganda, with the tools they need to live out the call of *Laudato Si'* in each of their future parishes. In the words of Co-Founder and President Father Emmanuel Katongole, this integration of “integral ecology ambassadors” into parishes will create “stronger pillars for the protection of our environment” across the country.

The parishes are also bought into this new program. Father Mathias Jooga, a parish priest at Nandere, said that BLI's success to date has helped create this buy in, as communities in the area “are already witnessing the benefits of the nature caretakers trained.” The area bishop, Bishop Lawrence Mukasa, is also excited about the idea. He has already instructed all area priests to begin gardens at each parish. “By adopting this proactive approach, where priests lead the fight against poverty and [toward] environmental restoration,” he says, “We are confident in our ability to restore human dignity.”

One of the seminarians, Erick Bakatunga, said the time spent at BLI was an important lesson for many of the seminarians, as it gave them a chance to see integral ecology in action rather than just in their classroom studies. “BLI has helped us advance our understanding of the Pope's encyclical, *Laudato Si'*,” he noted. “Before coming here, many of us had never worked with the soil, with the ground. But now we've been able to see integral ecology in action and interact with those on the rural farms.”

In late July, the seminarians received certificates in integral ecology, officially becoming commissioned BLI Caretakers. They have since continued their classical seminarian studies and will be placed in their new parishes soon.



2024 Quotes

“Water has begun flowing again in the wetland, indicating that the ecosystem is being restored.”

- Peter Sembogo (translated), Chairperson of Luyobyo Village, on the effects of Lazarus' Forest



“PLAN A TRIP TO BLI. . . Mother nature is still protected at this Institute.”

- A local birder's review after visiting Lazarus' Forest



“I want to be a professional agriculturalist. I want to teach people back in my community.”

- Edward Musisi Mboowa (translated), a double amputee who served as BLI's first trainee with a disability

“BLI is not a project. BLI is a movement, a revolution of integral ecology.”

- Co-Founder and President Father Emmanuel Katongole at the 2024 Inaugural Indaba



“By adopting this proactive approach, where priests lead the fight against poverty and environmental degradation, we are confident in our ability to restore human dignity.”

- Bishop Lawrence Mukasa on BLI's new pastoral outreach program

Resurrecting Lazarus: A Restored Forest

BLI's Lazarus' Forest—the only remaining natural forest in the Luweero District—currently occupies nearly 250 acres of BLI's campus and continues to grow every year. Named after Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, who Jesus resurrected from the dead, the forest too has been resurrected to its natural state. Local species of birds, monkeys, and snakes have returned, and water can once again be found flowing through the forest's riverbed. The forest's oldest tree—a Muvule tree that runs 42 meters high and is estimated to be 82 years old—also stands tall, now protected from further encroachment and environmental degradation.

Such a resurrection comes after decades of destruction. In the early twentieth century, missionaries used the forest's resources to produce rubber. It later was transformed into a space for mass production of cocoa and jackfruit products to be sold to the markets. Most recently, its trees have been cut to be used as firewood for cooking.

BLI, however, has put an end to such extractive and harmful practices, instead working to restore the forest to its natural state. This has included numerous efforts, including planting thousands of seedlings of local tree species throughout the forest; finding and reducing harmful, invasive species; working with community members to stop the extraction of firewood through collaborative educational efforts; and diligently tracking changes in the ecosystem to determine what is or is not working.

The efforts have already proven fruitful. Over 200 species of birds now call the forest home, and birders come from across Uganda—indeed across the world—to see the local species that have returned to their home region. The stream that provides water to six local villages, dry when BLI started its efforts, is flowing once again, helping fill up nearby wetlands. Local villagers have even commented that the air itself feels different, more fresh.

Given this success, BLI was recently featured at COP29 as a representation of the quality reforestation efforts happening in Uganda. A [video](#) on the forest and its success can be found on YouTube.





A new classroom structure provides shade for students engaged in field training.



The tree nursery provides protection to our seedlings until they are ready for planting.



The forest firepit allows for community gatherings and celebrations.



The goat shed sits on slanted concrete to ensure we collect the goat urine to be used as fertilizer.



The commons building, Mary's Hall, has administrative offices, a cafeteria, and a computer lab. Dinner is served here to trainees every night.

The Campus in Photos

The BLI campus in Nandere serves many purposes. It is a school and home for our residential trainees and faculty; it is a hub for collaboration and observation for researchers; it is a gathering location for community planning and learning for local residents; and it is an oasis for all wanting to see the joys of integral ecology. We always invite anyone interested to join us on our campus.

Celebrating The Journey: The Inaugural Indaba

Celebration was in the air in November for BLI USA's inaugural Indaba. Indaba is an African term for a gathering of elders coming together as a community for reflection, celebration, and planning. Held at the Morton Arboretum near Chicago, IL, the Indaba gathered more than seventy people from across the world who all want to learn about, celebrate, and advance BLI's mission.

The two-day gathering included a mix of presenters. The BLI Administrator, Father Joseph Kakooza, was able to travel to the United States to attend and brought his greetings from Uganda. BLI Co-Founder and President Father Emmanuel Katongole was also at the celebration, presenting both on BLI's journey to date and our journey ahead. We were also honored to be joined by regenerative farming expert Ray Archuleta, who gave an educational presentation on regenerative farming techniques and the ways in which they are being implemented on BLI's campus today. Ray is featured in the Netflix film *Kiss the Ground* and has visited BLI's campus multiple times to engage in soil education and experimentation with our Caretakers and trainees.

While the gathering included a mix of education, conversation, planning, and prayer, it was primarily a celebration of BLI's accomplishments to date—and a way to say thank you to all who made those accomplishments possible. Just a decade ago, BLI was still a dream. Today, it is a fully functioning institute with over 400 acres of land, 80 commissioned Caretakers, a dedicated teaching staff and robust curriculum, and an ever-growing presence across Uganda. Father Emmanuel reflected on all the individuals—worldwide—who have helped BLI get where it is today, sharing: “As the proverb says, ‘If you want to fast, go alone. If you want to go far, do not go alone but go together. At BLI, we want to go far.’” We remain incredibly thankful for our supporters in Uganda, in the United States, and across the world.



Who Are BLI's Caretakers?

The Caretaker program forms the heart of BLI's work. Since the program's inception, BLI has graduated 80 Caretakers. Many of these Caretakers completed the two-year residential program at BLI while others completed shorter, intensive courses. Regardless of how such individuals came to be Caretakers, one thing remains the same: They are now forever a part of the BLI family, commissioned with the task to spread integral ecology practices across Uganda and around the world. Meet some of our current Caretakers below.

Flavia was part of the first cohort of Caretakers to successfully complete the two-year program. She was commissioned in 2023, receiving the cohort's most outstanding student award. She has since started her own farm on her own plot of land, a farm that includes both crops and poultry. A mother of three, her motivation remains to care for her family and community. On what inspired her to join BLI, Flavia said, "I want to invest in agriculture business and grow organic food for my family."



Victor was officially commissioned as a Caretaker in 2024. He is most known for his initiative, VLandTV, in which he shares the knowledge he learned at BLI with others across Uganda and the world. On YouTube, the videos average hundreds of views with his instructional video on making an organic compost reaching over 1,000 views. "I very much want to bring awareness to people," Victor says. "Just like BLI brought awareness to me."

A current Caretaker trainee, Patricia is set to be commissioned in July 2026. She started her two-year course in February 2024. She is nineteen years old and comes from Kitagwenda District, which sits nearly 400 kilometers away in the southwestern corner of Uganda. Back home, her family has a 1.5-acre subsistence farm. She is excited to start her second year at BLI. So far, her favorite part has been learning how to take care of the animals.



Leadership

Administration

Father Emmanuel Katongole, *President*

Sylvester Kule, *Director*

Father Joseph Kakooza, *Administrator*

Simon Nyombi, *Head of Mary's School*

Chris Mukwaya, *Head of Lazarus's Forest*

Samson Luwagga, *Head of Martha's Market*

Josephine Nabakooza, *Community Outreach Coordinator*

Michael Kakooza, *Development Coordinator*

Vincent Kyomya, *Public Relations Officer*

Luke Kasozi, *Accountant*

Lydia Katusiime, *Cashier & Secretary*



Board of Directors

Father Hillary Muheezangango (Chair)

Father James Kabonghe

Father Joseph Kakooza

Father Emmanuel Katongole

Christine Flora Kizito

Susan Namujju Kintu

Margaret K. Sakwa (Secretary)

Father Cornelius Ssempala



**“The entire material universe speaks of God’s love,
God’s boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains:
everything is a caress of God.”**

- Laudato Si’ #84

Global Partners

BLI USA Partnership

Bethany Land Institute is a Ugandan-run organization. The BLI Uganda Board of Directors oversees the building of the campus, curriculum development, programs, human resources, and operations. A USA Board of Directors, along with staff and an Advisory Board of experts in their fields, operates as a sister organization to BLI Uganda under 501(c)(3) guidance. BLI USA assists with fundraising and makes grants to BLI Uganda for operations, special projects, and capital improvements. The Uganda Board is tasked with detailed reporting on how all funds sent from the USA are used. The Advisory Board assists both Boards within the areas of the members' expertise. There is a formal partnership agreement and lines of communication to ensure that the Boards can work together collaboratively.

2024 USA Board of Directors

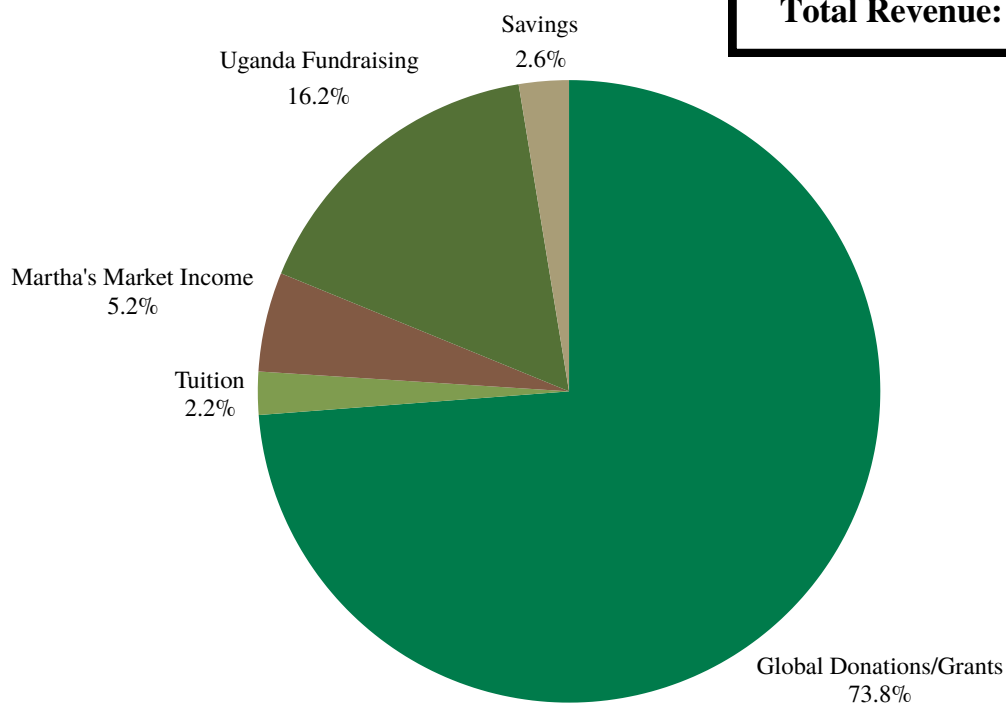
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BLI USA Staff

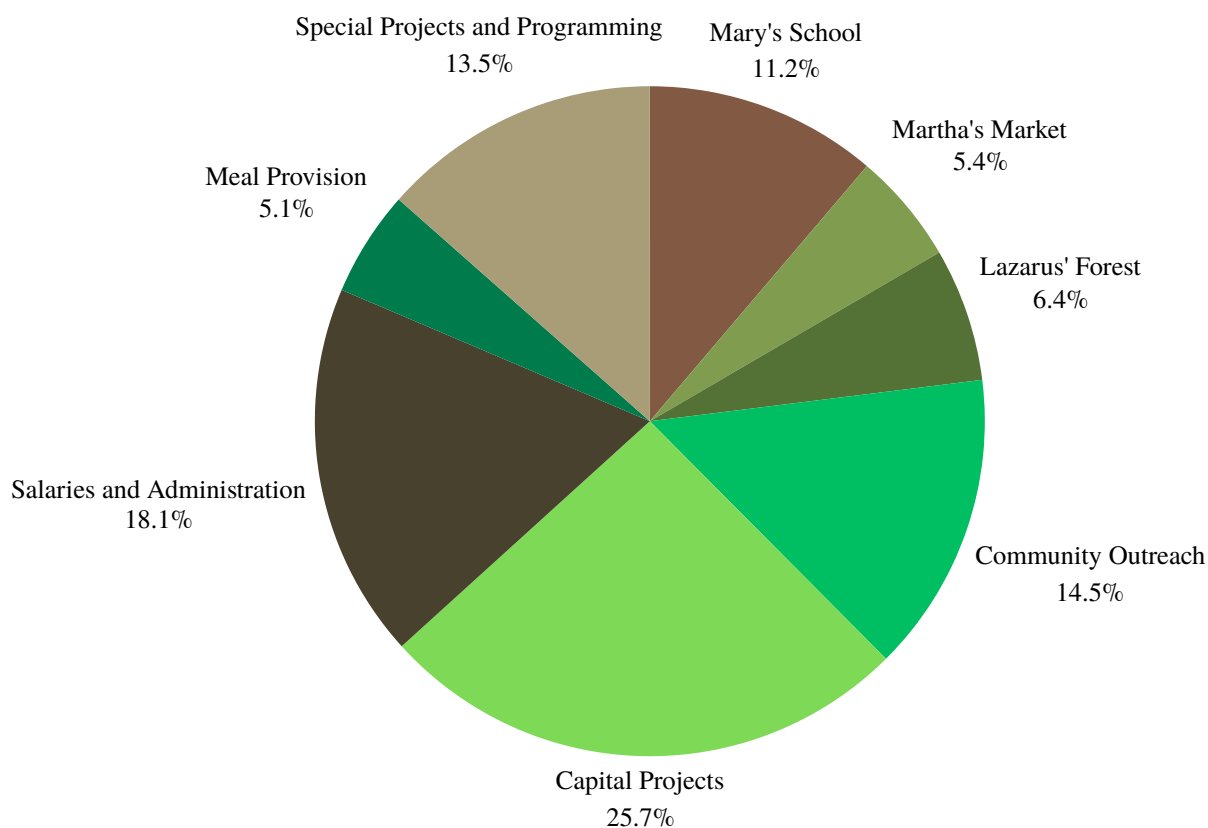
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Maureen Newsom, *Treasurer*
Father Arthur Ssemajja, *Advisor to the President*
Emma Ziegler, *Communications Director*



Revenue



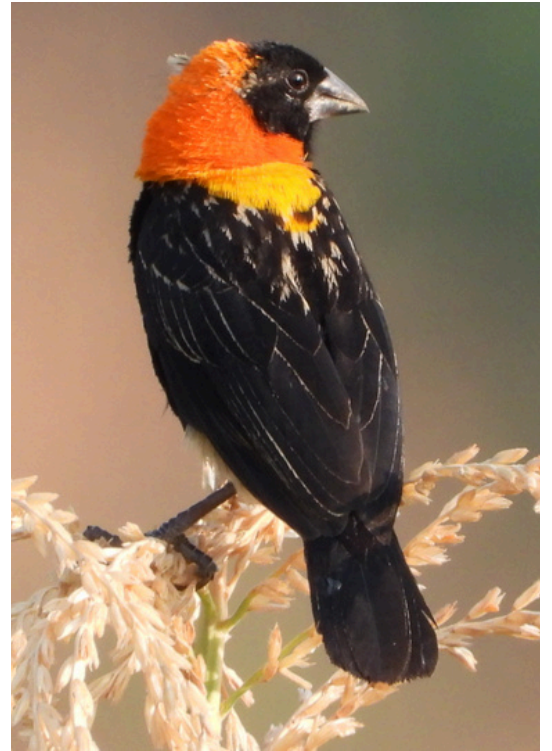
Expenses



***Note: The current surplus is due to capital projects that are ongoing. Such funds will be paid out in early 2025 as construction continues.**

The Birds of BLI

All photos taken on BLI's campus in Nandere.



Cohort II's Commissioning





**From all of us at BLI,
thank you.
Webale nyo.**

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