

Laudato Si' Africa Conference

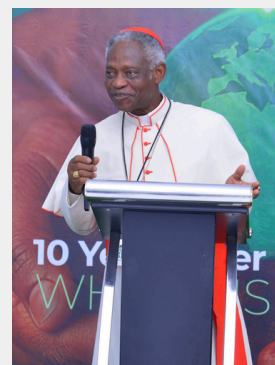
in review



Written & prepared by
Bethany Land Institute

July 22 - 25, 2025
Luweero, Uganda

Cultivating
interdisciplinary
approaches, empirical
research, and
practical solutions to
ecological concerns...



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Statement from BLI President Fr. Emmanuel Katongole

Dear Bethany Land Institute Family & Friends,

Marking the 10th anniversary of Laudato Si': On the Care of our Common Home, the Laudato Si' Africa conference welcomed an international cohort of practitioners, educators, and leaders to BLI's campus in Luweero, Uganda in July, 2025. While there were many gifts from the conference, I would like to highlight three:

First, the gift of hope. While the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor continues to be heard across Africa, the stories of those who have championed the spirit of Laudato Si' confirmed that "not all is lost" (Laudato Si' 205). I was particularly encouraged by the action of young scholars, activists, and organizers.

Second, the gift of BLI. In my closing remarks, I pointed at BLI as a model of integral ecology- a "parable in practice" of what a regenerated future of land, economics, and livelihoods in Africa looks like. The conference confirmed that BLI's unique gift is to be a place of learning, gathering, research, and innovation for Integral Ecology, consistent with our 2029 Strategic Vision for BLI as a "center for excellence."

Finally, the gift of partnerships. Together, we have strengthened old partnerships and inspired new ones. I extend my thanks to the University of Notre Dame, the conference's major sponsor, represented proudly by ND Vice President and Associate Provost Fr. Dan Groody, as well as ND faculty, staff, and graduate students. I also extend my gratitude to our partners at Taproot Earth, Laudato Youth Initiative, Laudato Si Action Platform, Borgo Laudato Si, Pactpan, and many others.

Our historic gathering serves as an important reminder that one is not alone on this journey; **we are united together on a mission to answer the call for the care of our common home.**

Thank you for your continued love and support for BLI,
Fr. Emmanuel Katongole, BLI President & Co-Founder



What is Laudato Si'?

In 2015, the Late Pope Francis published his Encyclical Letter titled “Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home.” In this historical document, Pope Francis calls for the action of all people against mindsets and lifestyles of environmental exploitation. As God’s interconnected creations, **Laudato Si’ reminds readers that the flourishing of people and the flourishing of our common home are deeply intertwined.** “[W]e come together to take charge of this home which has been entrusted to us,” he writes, “May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope” (Laudato Si’ 244).

Around the world, diverse movements have answered the call for the care of our common home. At the Laudato Si’ Africa Conference, the people behind these movements came together to cultivate their knowledge and identify the necessary work to come.



“Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that **our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life...**

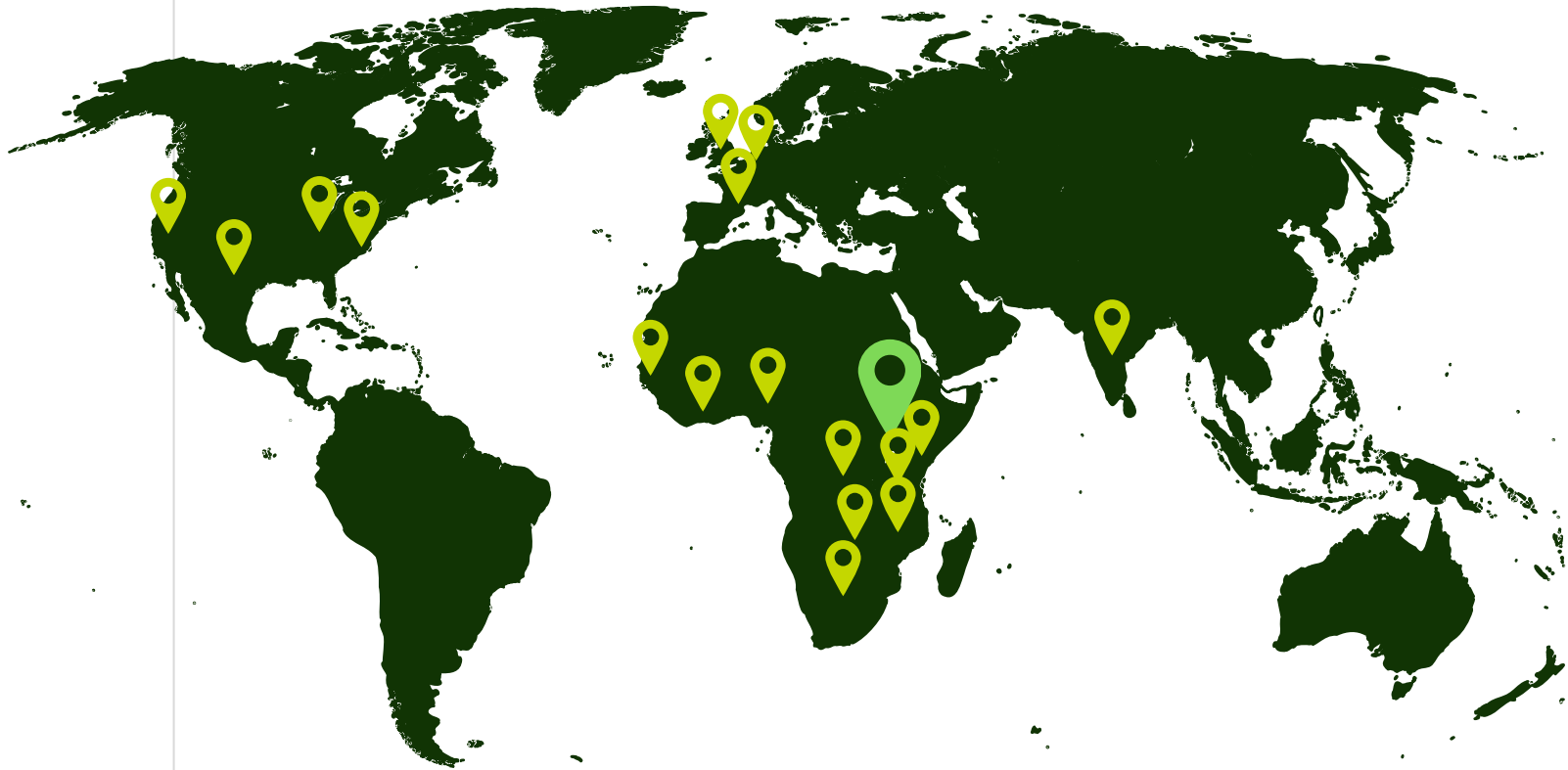
This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. **This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor;** she “groans in travail” (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.

Nothing in this world is indifferent to us.”

- Laudato Si’ 1-2

The Guests: Our Global Gathering

From around the world to Luweero, Uganda.



More than 140
scholars, practitioners,
educators, faith
leaders, & advocates.

10 African Countries Represented



**60+ Unique
Organizations**



**20 Countries
4 Continents**

**Longest Trip:
15,000 km from
Long Beach,
California!**

The Guests: Our Global Gathering

Bethany Land Institute had the distinguished honor of hosting **His Eminence Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson**, an author of and dedicated advocate for Pope Francis's Encyclical Laudato Si'. We were likewise blessed to host Uganda's Catholic leaders His **Excellency Archbishop of Kampala Paul Ssemogerere**, His Lordship Bishop Lawrence Mukasa of Kasana Luweero, and Vicar General Msgr. Francis Xavier Mpanga of Kasana Luweero.



From left to right: Bishop Mukasa, Cardinal Turkson, Fr. Katongole, Archbishop Ssemogerere

“We have the task, responsibility, of preserving a garden... this is the basic challenge that we have from creation.”

- Cardinal Turkson



Archbishop Ssemogerere delivering conference address



Bishop Mukasa delivering his conference address

“Mother earth has been greatly affected by our recklessness... which has adverse affects on all of us.”

- Bishop Mukasa

“Working together with BLI... has potential of turning our diocese into a model Laudato Si' diocese.”

- Archbishop Ssemogerere

What is Integral Ecology?

Integral Ecology recognizes the interconnectedness of all creation. A significant innovation to ecology studies and practices, Integral Ecology emphasizes the deep interrelation between the environment and the human systems that impact the environment, including economic, political, social, faith, and cultural structures. For practitioners of Integral Ecology, the call for the care of our common home can only fully be answered through the fostering of peace and justice in all facets of the human and environmental experience. **“We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental,”** Pope Francis explains (Laudato Si’ 139).

BLI employs the notion and practice of Integral Ecology to empower local students and communities to combat three major challenges in Uganda: **environmental degradation, food insecurity, and poverty**. We recognize the inherent connection between the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor, and the importance of education, environmentalism, and sound economics.

“When we speak of the ‘environment’, what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. **Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves** or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it...Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.”

- Laudato Si’ 139

“An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness. In the end, **a world of exacerbated consumption is at the same time a world which mistreats life in all its forms.**”

- Laudato Si’ 230



The Panels: Facilitating Palaver

Palaver: Deep listening through community conversation.

Embodying the African cultural *Palaver*, the Laudato Si' Conference organizers sought to facilitate **rich community dialogue and conversation** about matters essential to the fabric of our world. Facilitated by our Master of Ceremonies extraordinaire **Fr. Arthur Ssembajja**, attendees and panelists touched the core of issues of environmental degradation, sustainability, and thriving livelihoods.

Each panel was guided by a series of **questions** from moderators and the audience exploring tangible innovations for environmental challenges. Understanding that the future is in the hands of **humanity's collaboration**, we sought to create a space in which no one was talked at, but instead **spoken with**.



58 presenters,
140 attendees,
11 conversations.

"It was the best conference I have ever attended. The idea of using panels, instead of individual paper presentations, was ingenious."

- Participant Feedback



The Panels: Facilitating Palaver

Day 1 explored **"The Cry of the Earth & the Cry of the Poor,"** including challenges of extractivism, ecological violence, and the disproportionate burdens of marginalized communities.



Day 2 centered **"Ethics and Spirituality of Integral Ecology,"** exploring issues at the intersection of ecology, nonviolence, peacebuilding, theology, and ethics.

Day 3 framed **"Lines of Action and Sources of Hope,"** inspired by youth mobilization, sustainable development initiatives, ecological innovations, and diverse grassroots movements.



Faith leaders and S.T.E.M pioneers came together to **cultivate their diverse knowledge** and innovate new pathways for environmental justice.

What is Bethany Land Institute?

Uganda has the 4th fastest growing population on Earth. This growing population, coupled with inadequate ecological protections, has led to rapid deforestation. The lack of viable economic opportunities in rural Africa magnifies this environmental degradation, as youth are forced to engage in unsustainable livelihoods. Having emerged as a result of human activities, including Uganda's devastating Civil War (1980-1986), **there is hope that through *changed* human activities, this environmental devastation can be transformed.**

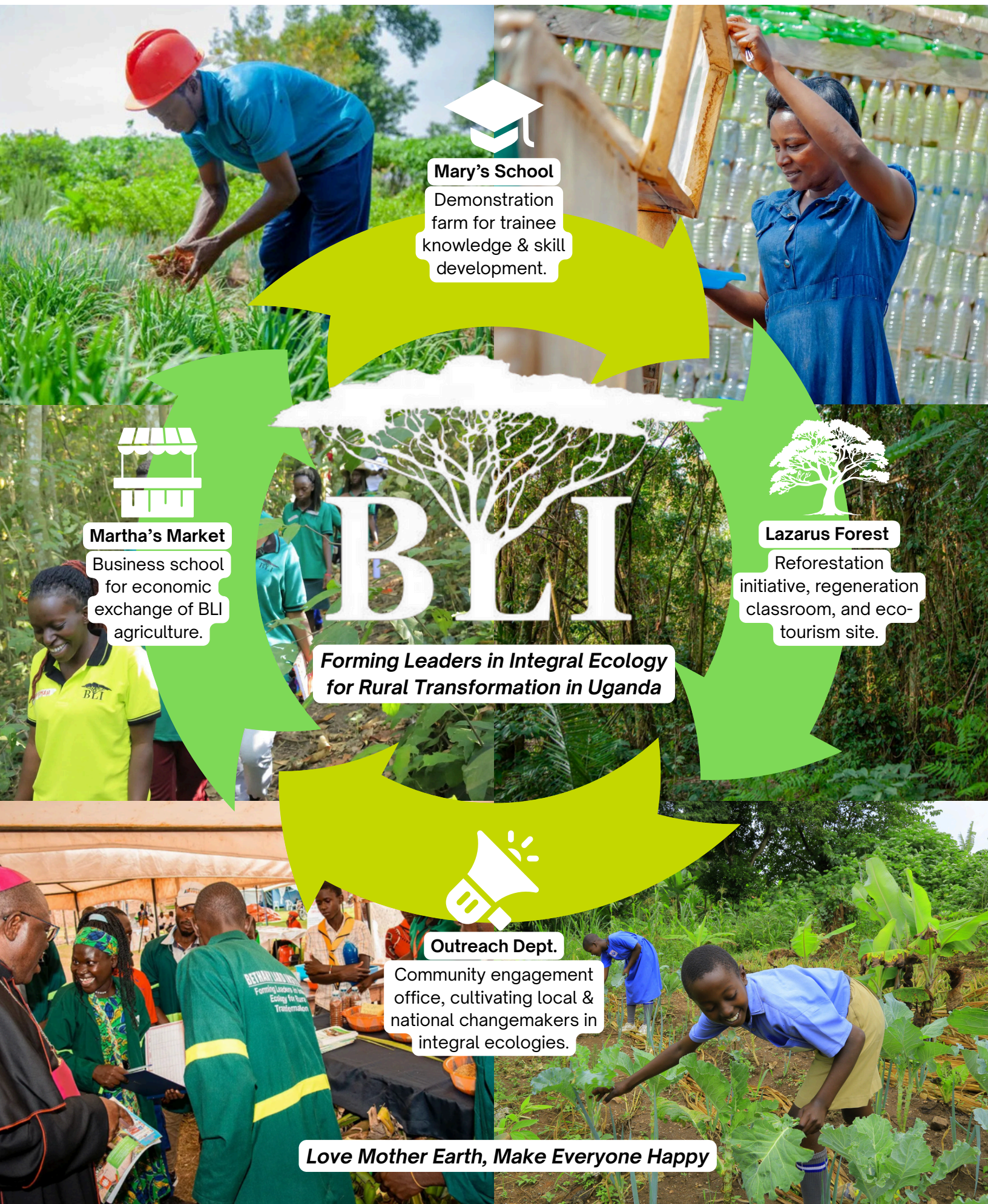
In 2012, Fr. Emmanuel Katongole, Fr. Cornelius Ssempala, and the late Fr. Anthony Rweza- having experienced the challenges of life in rural Uganda and having been inspired by Laudato Si'- realized that the major problems of deforestation, food insecurity, and poverty in Africa are interconnected. Addressing them thus requires "an education program" to cultivate a "distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking ...a lifestyle and a spirituality" (Laudato Si' 111). **Putting their inspiration into action, our beloved founders forged critical relationships with the diocese of Kasana Luweero and Archbishop Paul Ssemogerere to establish Bethany Land Institute in Luweero, Uganda.**



From left to right: Fr. Emmanuel Katongole, Fr. Cornelius Ssempala, Fr. Anthony Rweza.



Learn more about Bethany Land Institute at
www.bethanylandinstitute.org

**Mary's School**

Demonstration farm for trainee knowledge & skill development.

**Martha's Market**

Business school for economic exchange of BLI agriculture.

**Lazarus Forest**

Reforestation initiative, regeneration classroom, and eco-tourism site.

**Forming Leaders in Integral Ecology
for Rural Transformation in Uganda**

**Outreach Dept.**

Community engagement office, cultivating local & national changemakers in integral ecologies.

Love Mother Earth, Make Everyone Happy

Statement from Conference Chair Ruth Nakalembe

Dear BLI Family & Friends,

The entire team at Bethany Land Institute, in addition to our partners at the University of Notre Dame, Taproot Earth, and many others, are proud to present the report from the Laudato Si' Africa Conference. **As the conference chair, I am thrilled to re-experience the gifts of the conference with you.**

Together, we have enthusiastically embodied the late Pope Francis's call for the care of our common home. We celebrated the historic progress of changemakers in Laudato Si' over the last decade, while holding in our heads, hearts, and hands the necessary work to come. We cultivated our diverse knowledge in during panel discussions, meals, and networking sessions. We witnessed Integral Ecology in action during tours of Lazarus Forest and Mary's Farm with BLI's dedicated practitioners. We anchored mind, body, and spirit in the grounds of the Luweero ecosystems. We immersed ourselves in African culture thanks to talented local choirs and dancers. We were inspired by the energy of young trailblazers who will carry forward the torch of our love for mother earth. We laughed together, contemplated together, ate together, danced together, and **together we emerge transformed.**

I thank you for engaging with this historical gathering of international scholars, practitioners, advocates, activists, educators, and students, all joined in our commitment to a more peaceful and just world.

Forward together,
Ruth Nakalembe, BLI Community Engagement Officer & Laudato Si' Africa
Conference Chair



The Activities: Integral Ecology in Action

Laudato Si' is anchored in the call for *practical action* in service of our common home. There was no better place to host this historical gathering than on the grounds of **one of the world's leading centers in Integral Ecology and sustainable agriculture, Bethany Land Institute**. When not participating in rigorous conversation, conference attendees immersed themselves in witnessing Pope Francis's call *in action*.



“Laudato Si’ is no longer just great ideas of integral ecology, but a movement and process of action.”

- Participant Feedback



Lazarus Forest

Forest resurrection project



Tree Planting

Reforestation initiative



Mary's School

Integral Ecology training site



The Entertainment: Immersing in Ugandan Culture

From the most profound of poetry to the most contagious of dances, the experience of the Laudato Si' Africa Conference was made whole by the talented local performers who joined us. Thank you to our community groups for providing our guests with the *whole package* of the Uganda experience!



Cardinal Peter Turkson: The 7 C's of Laudato Si'

In a sea of captivating conversations and inspiring experiences, **one stood out:** Cardinal Peter Turkson's keynote address on the 7 C's of Laudato Si'. In the face of the often overwhelming task of caring for God's creation, Cardinal Turkson gave attendees **the gift of practical solutions.**

1. **Continuity:** Embody legacies of care for the Earth.
2. **Collegiality:** Collaborate in faith around the world.
3. **Conservation:** Resist exploitation through sustainability.
4. **Care:** Act as loving stewards, not rulers, of creation.
5. **Conversion:** Change mindsets and lifestyles.
6. **Citizenship:** Answer the cry of the earth & the cry of the poor.
7. **Contemplation:** Embrace the responsibility of God's creation.

"Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, **to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering** and thus to discover what each of us can do about it" (Laudato Si' 19).



"Cardinal Turkson's address reverbrates in my head. The 7 C's!"

- Participant Feedback

The Media: Laudato Si' Makes Headlines

Turns out, the world's stage is just as excited about spotlighting the care for our common home as we are! Check out some media highlights from the Laudato Si' Africa Conference. Click on the images below to read the stories!



Luweero, Uganda | THE INDEPENDENT | The Catholic Church has renewed its call for collective global action against climate change, urging political leaders and citizens alike to urgently take responsibility for environmental protection.

The Celebration: Commissioning Changemakers

The conference culminated in the official commissioning of BLI's 3rd cohort of caretaker leaders. There was no better way to close out our week together than to celebrate the **send-off of 18 dedicated trailblazers** in Integral Ecology!



Congratulations to Cohort 3 caretaker

leaders: Ebeju Francis, Gimono Allen, Iduuli John Babtist, Kamukama Angella, Kayesu Sharon, Kyomugisha Specioza, Mawanda Andrew Kaggwa, Mugabi Richard, Mulindwa Edrine, Musanje Henry, Mutibwa Samuel, Najjemba Esther, Nakimuli Jovia Bridget, Nakiriwo Mary, Ocen Brian, Odongo Richard, Sekyanzi Thomas, and Wabomba Jackson



The Feedback: “The Beauty of Having Conversations”

“An eye opener for everyone's call for the ‘bold cultural revolution’... a ‘ray of hope’ as we witness true happiness resulting from the restoration of the ecosystem, food security and sustainable livelihoods.”

- Participant Feedback



“We have solution with us, and we need to work together for our mother earth.”

- Participant Feedback



100% of respondents reported they would **take their learnings back to their communities.**



“It was a conference that truly **opened our eyes** to the harsh reality of how our environment has been, and continues to be, degraded... the conference moved beyond theoretical discussions and **focused on practical solutions** to today's ecological challenges... it was the best conference I have ever attended.”

- Participant Feedback

100% of respondents reported having **learned more about Laudato Si' and Integral Ecology.**

What Next?: BLI Called Higher

The overwhelming success of the Laudato Si' Africa Conference has called Bethany Land Institute to new heights. As the world reckons with the demands of the call for the care of our common home, **BLI is prepared to serve as a champion for the education and practice of Integral Ecology**. We are thankful for this diverse growth in the BLI network, and all of the work that made it happen.

All presentations and papers will be compiled into an **academic volume to be published by Springer Nature in 2026**, managed by faculty at the Keough School for Global Affairs, University of Notre Dame.

Continued development and expansion of the **Integral Ecology Working Group, under the Sowing Hope Project at Notre Dame**, is underway. This working group will serve as a crucial hub for ongoing collaboration, research, and praxis inspired by the conference. BLI will remain at the center of this movement - as a site for formation, as a laboratory for learning, and as a wellspring of inspiration.

BLI Strategic Goals:

1. Increase the number of **Caretaker trainees** per class to 32 by 2027, ensuring such trainees come from various villages across Uganda.
2. Produce at least **70% of all food consumed** at BLI on our own land by 2029.
3. Open an **official Lazarus' Forest information center** for visitors and researchers by 2027, equipped with classrooms and accommodations.
4. Ensure ongoing **partnerships with at least 20 community groups and 36 schools** by 2029.
5. Plant **1,000,000 trees by 2050**.



Thank You: The Partnerships That Made It Real

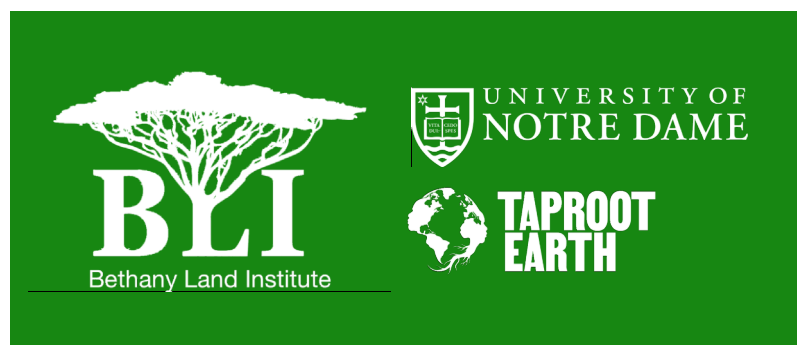
This conference was organized and hosted by **Bethany Land Institute, Uganda** and made possible by the generous support of the **University of Notre Dame**. We extend our thanks to the **Keough School of Global Affairs** (including the Kellogg Institute for International Studies, the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, and the Ansari Institute for Global Engagement with Religion) as well as the **Catholic Peacebuilding Network**, the **Just Transformations to Sustainability Initiative**, and the **Institute for Social Concerns**. This conference was also made possible with support from **BLI USA** and **Taproot Earth**.



Special Thanks To Our Organizing Committees

THE BLI USA TEAM: Ariane Woodworth, Fr. Emmanuel Katongole, Fr. Emmanuel Ojeifo, Heather Foucault-Camm, Richard Marcantonio, and Theresa Murray.

THE BLI UGANDA TEAM: Chris Mukwaya, Fionah Kansiime, Fr. Joseph Kakooza Nyanzi, Ivan Bukenya, Joseph Mutabazi, Luke Kasozi, Ruth Nakalembe, Samson Luwagga, Susan Kintu, Simon Nyombi, Sylvester Kule, and Vincent Kyomya.



Closing Thoughts...



“Small is beautiful, but big is necessary.”

- Ray Offenheiser, Conference Participant

“The real work of planet-saving will be small, humble, and humbling, and (insofar as it involves love) pleasing and rewarding.”

- Wendell Berry

“Start small. Start well. Start now.”

- Bethany Land Institute motto



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Thank You

The Conference was held in honor of the inspirational legacy of the late Pope Francis (b. 1936), a formidable moral and spiritual leader and passionate advocate for the care of creation, who passed on April 21, 2025, aged 88.



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Forming Leaders in Integral Ecology for Rural Transformation in Uganda