

UP WILD BRINGS WORSHIP OUTDOORS

By Wendy Healy



STORIES
OF FAITH
IN ACTION
2022 - 2023

One of UP Wild's youngest members stops during a wilderness walk to study moss.

Located in the town of Marquette in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, UP Wild Church is among the newest ministries in the growing movement of "wild" outdoor worship communities. The church holds its worship and prayer services outdoors and hosts nature walks, wilderness reflection and field trips to explore God's creation amid the scenic beauty of the peninsula.

Church a wide social media network, a heart for social issues, relationships with local residents, history with the local Lutheran and Catholic communities, and boundless energy.

Jim Duehring, assistant to the bishop of the Northern Great Lakes Synod and a director for evangelical mission, supported Lantto in starting the ministry. "Knowing that Lanni has both life

Lantto providing prayers and reflections and encouraging worshipers to explore the outdoors. A recent gathering, for example, focused on how the Beatitudes relate to daily life. Other activities have included a "Wonder and Ponder" walk, a mobile prayer group and field trips to local operations supporting environmental sustainability (e.g. a thrift store).



UP Wild members hiking to a waterfall to do a reflection from Scripture. Year-round, UP Wild members participate in nature walks, hike together for reflection and gather around the bonfire for "Pine" Sunday Service.

An ecumenical ministry of the Northern Great Lakes Synod and the Episcopal Diocese of Northern Michigan, UP Wild Church was started in 2019 to attract younger people and those disenchanted with traditional church, and to foster a deeper spiritual connection with God outdoors.

"It's a church outside the box," said Lanni Lantto, mission developer for the church. A lay minister and former fashion designer, she had grown up in the area and wanted to return there from upstate New York, where she and her husband ran a spiritual retreat house different from UP Wild.

Lantto is passionate about the outdoors and brought to UP Wild

experiences and passions for doing this work well—and the fact that she is a layperson and not a pastor—provides a model for the creative ways that the church can be church in today's day and age," he said. "One doesn't have to be a pastor to be a good mission developer."

Lantto said she dreamed up UP Wild Church while watching her son play in a park and talking to her high school friend Lydia Bucklin, canon of the ordinary for the local Episcopal diocese. Bucklin sought ways to partner with the ELCA in reaching younger Christians and those who had stopped attending church.

With 15 to 25 regular members, UP Wild holds services on the first Sunday of the month, with

Lantto added that pastors often come to experience the outdoors together. "People connect to the outdoors in so many different ways," she said. "What draws us closer to God outdoors is that God created it. It's a living cathedral. When we go outside, we step into God's world, full of mystery and wonder and awe. When we feel this, we have a connection to something higher than ourselves, and we feel loved. I find that people feel more at peace, loved and connected outdoors. There's healing there."

UP Wild Church is sustained by ELCA and Episcopal grants, donations and member gifts, especially your mission support dollars. Its five-year expansion plan includes starting a branch in the Rapid River area.