



Louisville Archbishop Shelton Fabre greets attendees at The Way Forward after Mass in the crypt chapel of the Cathedral of the Assumption in Louisville. (NCR photo/Michael Sean Winters)



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Last year, "[The Way Forward](#)" gathering at the University of San Diego focused on *Laudato Si'*. Among the attendees were Aruni Bhatnagar and Ted Smith from the Christina Lee Brown Envirome Institute at the University of Louisville, and they expressed the desire to look for ways to collaborate with Catholic universities in the future. Our friends at America Media [made a short video](#) about the San Diego gathering.

Last Friday (April 11), representatives from Boston College, Fordham University, Loyola University Chicago and Sacred Heart University — the four schools that sponsor The Way Forward — met with Bhatnagar and Smith in Louisville to explore areas for future collaboration. We were joined by representatives from the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities and the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities.

Full disclosure: I am a fellow at Sacred Heart's Center for Catholic Studies and am one of the organizers of The Way Forward gatherings. But, for this Louisville gathering, I was the border collie, nothing more. I made sure everyone got to the welcome dinner at Doc Crow's, known for its great southern food.

The next morning, the group walked over to the beautiful Cathedral of the Assumption, where Louisville Archbishop Shelton Fabre led us in a Mass. We were only a dozen people, so we celebrated Mass in the intimate crypt chapel, and the archbishop brought us upstairs afterward to see the historic 1852 main sanctuary. We also saw the new micro-forest the Envirome Institute is building across the street from the cathedral.

We cannot have healthy people without a healthy world to live in.'

—Aruni Bhatnagar

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Once the meeting started, my role was done. The conversation turned to research, which for those of us trained in the humanities means going to an archive and sifting through documents. For scientists, research means experiments.

What struck me most was the way all the scientists at the table connected their ideas about research with a deep commitment to the mission of Catholic universities. It was never spoken of as an add-on, as whipped cream on a sundae. The mission of Catholic universities is, like all universities, to disseminate knowledge, but we also understand our responsibility to the wider community, the importance of pursuing human flourishing and societal justice, and the fact that God's mysterious presence is a part, indeed the most important part, of the reality we study.

I wasn't the only one who noticed the frequency with which mission came to the fore in the conversations. "In the current climate of discord and disruption, it was heartening to come together and explore how the mission of Catholic colleges and universities intersects with creating environments for human flourishing and responds to *Laudato Si'*'s call to 'care for our common home,' " said Sacred Heart's Kurt Bartholomew.

The mission of the Envirome Institute is also clearly articulated: fostering a new vision of health. This includes physical health, mental health, environmental health, cultural health, etc., all of them integrated. Their "new vision of health" is what Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* called "integral human ecology."

"We at the Envirome Institute are excited to partner with Catholic universities to address the urgent issues of climate and health," Bhatnagar told me after the meeting. "At the Institute, we are working to uncover the many ways in which environmental conditions and forces shape human health in all its forms. The message of the Catholic Church articulated in *Laudato Si'* resonates well with our view that we cannot have healthy people without a healthy world to live in."



The Christina Lee Brown Envirome Institute has planted this microforest across the street from the Cathedral of the Assumption in Louisville. (NCR photo/Michael Sean Winters)

Smith echoed the prominence of mission. "This group of higher learning institutions is guided by a mission that transcends political cycles and embraces faith and the tools of science to inspire new learning bringing us closer to creation — the source of all health," he said. The reference to "political cycles" reflects the fact that a significant part of the discussion focused on the changing landscape for federal grants.

One important Envirome Institute project is the greening of an impoverished neighborhood in Louisville, and measuring the health outcomes from creating a green canopy. Former Sen. Bill Frist, himself a medical doctor, [wrote about the project in this article](#) at Forbes, and Anne Thompson [profiled](#) the work in a segment for NBC's "Today Show."

The need to provide children with healthier environments emerged as a central theme of the meeting. "The exponential accumulation of heavy metals, micro plastics, herbicides, pesticides and forever chemicals in our environment are causing the increase in cancers, mental unwellness, and neurological diseases like

Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, ADD and autism," Loyola's Nancy Tuchman explained. "The networks of Catholic and Jesuit universities are primed to integrate the disciplines of environmental science, medicine, public health, public policy and social work to address the challenge of environmental degradation and health of children."

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It is easy to feel despair at the enormity of the problems posed by environmental degradation, especially the harms inflicted on the poor. None of that despair raised its head around the table in Louisville. Scientists with a sense of mission, and the know-how to explore problems and seek solutions, eagerly discussed ways they can assist each other in their work.

Last week, the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development [issued the theme](#) for this year's World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation: "Seeds of Peace and Hope." In Louisville, some of those seeds were planted. In the weeks ahead, the group will flesh out some concrete plans to make sure those seeds come to flower.