

# Connecting with Religious Community Landowners

This workshop was originally presented at the 2006 Mass Land Conservation Conference. The goal is to provide insights into what motivates some tax-exempt organizations to preserve their land; how to approach such an institution; how to identify the decision-makers and work with the decision-making processes of these organizations.

## **1. The Religious Lands Conservancy Project**

Active since 2002; currently supporting 18 religious communities considering preservation.

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                                 RLC Project Manager, Kathy McGrath, 978.369.6766

## **2. Opportunity**

These lands are worthwhile conservation prospects: held for long periods by owners who are careful stewards. Probably the greatest source of land of conservation value still available.

In current financial climate difficult—threat of sale more likely.

## **3. Introducing the Communities**

Many religious communities share values inspired by teachings such as Thomas Berry in the Great Work: breakdown of earth systems is at such a critical point, nothing else should distract us from this issue, not even the human poor.

Many women's religious orders are attempting to create a model of life that is possible if all the support systems of our culture collapse. They have been living alternative lifestyles for a very long time with projects connected with the land and sustainability.

## **4. What would inspire an organization that cannot benefit from the tax deduction usually associated with conserving land?**

Religious communities are motivated by mission and values. Focus on uncovering the values common to the organization and the land protection community, such as:

- A sense of land preservation as a mission.
- A concern for the legacy the organization will leave to future generations, responsibility for supporting the web of life.
- The importance of relationship to the community, especially to the larger, global community.
- A shared tradition of land stewardship.

## **5. Developing trust between religious community and land trust**

Religious groups can break out of their isolation and learn to trust; understand that their co-workers in the 21st century may be those protecting the global commons.

- Identify the most sympathetic contacts within the religious group and work closely with them.
- Find out what the community envisions for its future, and what role their land will play.
- Move slowly; take time to find key elements that tie land preservation to the community's goals.
- Meet with key contacts regularly, document decisions and open issues.
- Involve the community's decision-makers.

## **6. Identifying the real decision makers**

- Many groups are independent financial entities, self-sustaining and self-governing.
- Some have decision-makers at a distance and uninvolved in practical matters.
- Recent trends toward collegiality and consolidation of groups may complicate process.

## **7. De-mystifying the process**

- Meet, update and document regularly.
- Maintain focus on common goals and values.
- Candidly discuss financial details; set realistic expectations.
- Encourage landowner to hire reputable and experienced professionals to advise.
- Develop a process for solving problems when they arise.

## **8. Succeeding**

- Persevere. Communities may be many-layered requiring multiple permissions, or a universal vote of members, to take action.
- Work with the community's situation—some may be in financial crisis.
- Help the community to separate consideration of this decision from other decisions about their future.
- Use other religious communities who have been successful in preserving their land as examples. Offer contacts.
- Seek assistance from those who "speak the same language." Ask RLCP.

## **9. How to Work with RLCP**

RLCP is active in three phases: Outreach / education, identifying conservation opportunities, pursuing preservation outcome.

RLCP can provide: introduction and background information, "translation," support at initial meetings until rapport established.

