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Faith Community Recognized as Critical Force in Effort to Restore Watershed

(September 12, 2016 – Baltimore, MD) – Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake (IPC) will be awarded \$199,300 to engage congregations in caring for the Earth in the Jones Falls Watershed of Baltimore, Maryland. The project will raise awareness about human impacts on the Earth, and accelerate the implementation of pollution-reduction projects on congregational property. The grant will be awarded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) with funds from the Environmental Protection Agency and CSX. IPC's proposal was one of 39 grants awarded across the Chesapeake Bay Watershed states and one of 9 grants awarded in Maryland, in the "Small Watershed Grants" category. IPC Executive Director Jodi Rose reported that this is the first time IPC has earned a grant of this size, "We are in the company of an impressive group of grant recipients and look forward to executing our innovative strategy for cultivating stewardship within the faith community."

IPC's proposal will drive behavior change and cultivate a sense of responsibility for the Jones Falls watershed. There are over 250 congregations in this watershed alone, representing thousands of individuals who turn to their place of worship for ethical guidance and leadership. A total of 30 congregations will be engaged in at least a few actions, and of those, 15 will make deeper commitments by engaging in at least six acts of stewardship over the 2-year period. Each of those 15 congregations will sign a Covenant to each other, committing to ongoing stewardship of the Earth and holding each other accountable. "Think 'support group' for congregations who are working to save the Earth!" says Rose. Actions taken by the congregations could include installing rain gardens onsite, conducting community education, performing an energy audit of their facilities, planting a food garden, or hosting an outdoor reality tour of environmental degradation for their neighbors. Restoration goals include treatment and/or removal of 15,000 square feet of impervious surfaces, developing nutrient management plans at 8 congregations, planting 150 trees at Jones Falls congregations and installing up to 5,000 square feet of rain gardens.

The program scales up a unique spiritually-rooted visioning process that IPC piloted from 2014-2016. IPC is also teaming up with organizations beyond water issues in recognition that the faith community engages holistically in caring for the Earth. Congregations will be surrounded with multiple support organizations – called "personal trainers" – and provided a customized Menu for Action for their region prior to their Visioning Sessions. This will enable the congregations to discern for themselves the actions they will take and receive support from organizations equipped to work with them. The pilot last year accelerated actions at six congregations (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGpAB3h5fUE>).

The project team includes Blue Water Baltimore, Maryland Sea Grant (part of the University of Maryland System), and Interfaith Power & Light of the DC-Maryland-Virginia region. "Faith communities are among the most powerful places in the world to lead conversations about being stewards of the Earth," says Joelle Novey, Director of Interfaith Power & Light (DC.MD.NoVA), who will be supporting congregations in establishing internal green ministries through the program. "We're looking forward to supporting these congregations in fulfilling their distinctive call to be stewards of the Jones Falls watershed."

The Jones Falls Watershed offers racial, religious, and water quality diversity. Upper tributaries exhibit signs of good water quality, while lower tributaries in inner city Baltimore are degraded. In the context of a single watershed, the human impact on water quality can be witnessed. Faith communities seeking to work for social justice need look no further than their own watershed to see neighbors downstream with no access to safe recreational water, streets littered with oppressive trash, excessive energy bills, food desserts, and insufficient tree canopy. At a time when environmental issues are often seen as polarizing, this program will bring people together across racial, religious, and political lines as watershed neighbors working together to heal Earth and community.

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