



PATHWAY

WALKING alongside

strengthening congregational community ministries

»» Our Saviour Community Garden ««

»» OUR SAVIOUR COMMUNITY GARDEN - THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF OUR SAVIOUR, DALLAS, TX

The idea that sprouted into Our Saviour Community Garden took time and careful tending and gradually grew into greater things. After only five years, the volunteer-tended garden plot had donated 11 tons of food to nearby pantries. "It was on the drawing board for two and a half years before we started it," said Becky Smith, garden coordinator. The plan was an ambitious one for a 30-member mission church in a changing neighborhood.

Founded in 1955, the church was no longer able to support a full-time priest and was on the Dallas diocese's list of churches to be "replanted." Even though the church had few members, it had something else: land and an interest in gardening. The plan for a community garden offered too many benefits to ignore, such as involving the community and supplementing the food that went on residents' tables. After the garden proved successful, the diocese asked the church to create a 20-year-plan for its existence, and members/gardeners are happily reaping the bounty of what they sowed.

Goals of the ministry

The mission of Our Saviour's "Plot Against Hunger" is:

- to give back to the community,
- to help food insecure families have a place to grow vegetables,
- to be good stewards of the earth, and
- to pass along these gifts while planting seeds of hope and faith.

The 30 members of the church discussed different ideas that would help cement the church's role in the community. Once they developed the garden, church members soon realized they could help other denominations start their own plots. "They provide people to work with us, and we talk about who we are and help them get started," Smith said. "It's led to a lot of different ways that we can help," Smith said. "We also feel like we are a good example: if this little mission with just a few people can do this, then anyone can. We can make a difference with God's help."

Funding the ministry

The ministry's funding is as likely to come in the form of soil amendments and earthworms as it is dollar and cents. Businesses give mini-grants that pay for picnic tables and fencing, and some sponsor garden plots. The garden has also become a teaching garden for the Dallas-based nonprofit Gardeners In Community Development (GICD), and GICD experts taught the church's gardeners to use inexpensive growing methods that help the environment. The church's environmental stewardship helped them win many awards including a rainwater cistern and watershed roofed pavilion from Organic Garden Magazine and Aveeno. Also courtesy of GICD, the community garden has been the beneficiary of garden amendments and livestock (in the form of worms and bees) from Heifer International, a nonprofit organization with a goal to end world hunger and poverty.

MORE ON BACK

» Our Saviour Community Garden «

Recruiting volunteers

A typical workday averages 40 to 50 volunteers, with some working all day and some a few hours. Individuals, families and groups decide how often to come, sometimes monthly, and sometimes once or twice a year. "In the nicer parts of the year, until the weather gets too hot, we have a group of seniors that lives in retirement apartments and they come over. They like the fellowship and being next to nature." Successes of the garden have prompted stories in newspapers and other venues, which bring in more volunteers. Another recruiting tool is the Tuesday harvest days. "People come in, I fix breakfast, we have fellowship, and then we go out and garden," Smith said.

Structure of the program

The first garden area is called Plot against Hunger, and the church planted it with the help and expertise of GICD. The 55-foot-by-100-foot unit is next to the church, on the north side. The garden contains 20 plots; families or individuals tend 14 of them, and six plots produce items for food pantries. Also, each family or individual donates 10 percent of their plot's produce to the pantry. A second 60-by-200 foot garden called Just Greens provides a learning area for groups or individuals that want a plot to work on together. Also in this area, planners are working on a large pantry garden and a wheelchair-accessible spot for people who have disabilities.

Promoting the program to the community

"Our list of connections has grown. I send out notices about everything except the harvest, because it is every Tuesday. Community gardens are more in the news now, and we hope it's not just a fad," Smith said. Visitors go on the garden's mailing list. Also, the church joined the local chamber of commerce. "When we go to meetings, we tell about what we do, and we learn about others. Some groups are looking for a service project, so we set up something special for them." Leaving the garden gate unlocked helps. The gate serves only to keep out stray dogs. "There are no locks on the garden gates. When you are part of a community and respect and love them, you don't have any problems."

Program as evangelism

"It's important that we are God's family—we are just a family of people. We feel being a good example by caring for each other and His creation is a way that we can share our faith. We are bridging differences," Smith said. "It's good for nutrition and the environment and the most wonderful way to live my faith—and a number of people feel that way."

By: Barabara Elmore

Stepping Stones

Brief descriptions of how to implement specific ministries. For each of the five broader areas above, many ministries can be envisioned. We have identified a few of these for each area and have articulated the steps for how that ministry might be planned.

Backpacks

The Walking Alongside Web site provides a Backpack of additional resources and examples for this specific ministry. Included are published articles, Web sites, selected books, testimonials and existing ministries with contact information.

Food for the Journey

A short devotional based on scripture that can be used in church bulletins, as a Moment for Mission during worship or as an introduction to a Bible study.

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