

## STEPPING STONES



# WALKING alongside

strengthening congregational community ministries

## » Step by Step: Community Gardening Ministry «

### » GETTING STARTED

#### What is a Community Gardening Ministry?

A community garden is a place where people come to share basic resources: land, water, and sunlight (Boston Urban Gardeners, 1982).<sup>1</sup> These basic resources, when combined and cultivated, produce both nutritional and economic benefits for those involved in the gardening and for those who receive its produce. Growing fruits and vegetables together to benefit neighborhood residents creates a learning environment and builds a sense of community. Community gardens are often located in vacant lots, on church property, or within a neighborhood. They often represent community restoration as they provide an environment for teaching about nutrition and hunger issues, they often involve the revitalization of a piece of land that has gone unused, and they provide economic benefits. The low cost vegetables produced can be used for donation, community consumption, or retail sale at local farm stands.

#### Why is there a need?

In the United States, 35.1 million people – including 12.4 million children – live in households where people skip meals or eat less to make ends meet.<sup>2</sup> This means that, currently, 1 in 10 households in the United States are living with hunger or are at risk of living with hunger.<sup>3</sup>

Families are often forced to live on inadequate emergency food provisions because they cannot afford the nutritious food they need. Research shows that children who experience severe hunger have higher levels of chronic illness, anxiety and depression, and behavior problems than children with adequate nutrition.<sup>4</sup>

"Food insecurity," a term that describes the plight of those who do not know where their next meal will come from, is a growing problem. In 2006, emergency food assistance increased seven percent from the previous year. Almost half of those requesting emergency food assistance in United States' cities were families with children, and more than one-third of those families were employed. The need is attributable to rising housing costs, rising medical costs, and poverty due to low income.<sup>5</sup>

#### Stepping out in faith

Here are some "first steps" to consider before your congregation begins a community garden:

- Start conversations with church staff and members to determine the church's interest level in community gardening.
- Participate in assessments designed to determine the community's interest and ability to sustain a community garden.
- Do the research to discover how your church can secure the initial funding for a community garden, recruit and retain volunteers, and procure the necessary space for a community garden. Talk to gardening and farming experts to determine the best planting and harvesting plan for a garden in your community.
- Contact other churches or organizations with community gardens to discuss their positive and negative experiences in beginning and maintaining the ministry.
- Contact other community organizations to see how you can partner with them in distributing excess food.



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### What this ministry might look like in your church

While community gardens may look similar across the country, churches can use their gardens in several ways:

- Contact your local food pantry and offer donations of fresh vegetables for their clients
- Contact an agency or professional who might donate nutrition or cooking classes for the congregation and neighborhood
- Invite local schools to use the garden as a nutrition education experience
- Distribute vegetables to the church's neighbors
- Have a "community harvest" and invite the neighborhood to work in the garden with the congregation and give the vegetables to the volunteers.
- Use a portion of the garden's produce for a "soup supper" with soup made from fresh ingredients. Ask for donations for a local feeding organization, or invite community members to the meal.

### 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.

### Pathways

Learn from the first-hand accounts of those already engaged in this specific ministry. Plus, develop networking contacts as go-to sources to explore solutions to challenges or celebrations of successes.

### 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.

### Reference

1. Boston Urban Gardeners. (1982). *A Handbook of Community Gardening*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
2. United States Department of Agriculture. (2006, December 29). *Household Food Security in the United States, 2005*. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err29>.
3. Bread for the World Institute. (2007, January 3). *Hunger Facts*. <http://www.bread.org/learn/hunger-basics>.
4. Weinreb, L., Wehler, C., Perloff, J., Scott, R., Hosmer, D., Sagor, L., & Gundersen, C. (2002). Hunger: It's Impact on Children's Health and Mental Health. *Pediatrics*, 110(4).
5. United States Conference of Mayors. (2006, December). *Hunger and Homelessness Survey 2006*. <http://www.usmayors.org/hungersurvey/2006/report06.pdf>