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# Allelon Community Garden

BY ELIZABETH D. SANDS WISE

**Working side-by-side in their church garden one hot summer, members formed a better community. They discovered that relationships cultivated over dirt and sweat, rather than donuts and coffee, were different because as individuals they were more vulnerable, and together more productive.**

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A few dozen church members stood outside Faith Baptist Church in Georgetown, Kentucky, on a blustery Sunday afternoon, dress shoes perched in the freshly tilled soil. Toddlers meandered freely about, and senior citizens were sprinkled among the twenty- and thirty-somethings who had decided to get their hands dirty at church.

We had gathered to dedicate a garden.

Within weeks, two plots of tilled-up soil were transformed from dirt into garden, thanks in part to the donation of compost from a local family farm, and the hands of the youth group on the church's annual service project day. We had a fence to keep the rabbits out, bark mulch for paths, a host of tender plants breaking through the soil, and an outer border of marigolds to fend off mosquitos.

We were optimistic – perhaps too optimistic. We did not anticipate the difficulty of lugging water out to our garden space – more than one hundred yards from the nearest faucet – in the middle of a hot and dry growing season. We assumed that the old adage “many hands make light work” would apply to our garden: surely, we would have many hands involved. We dreamt of church potlucks full of garden salads and fresh veggies, which would require that our lettuce, tomato, and pepper plants all bore fruit simultaneously.

And so, oblivious to what lay ahead, we knelt in the dirt, dug our hands into the soil, and we prayed. The journey of Allelon Community Garden had begun.

## A NAME FOR OUR DREAM

*Allelon* is a Greek word used in the New Testament to mean “one another” or “together,” and is recognizable in clauses like “Greet *one another* with a holy kiss” (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Peter 5:14), the commandment to “love *one another*” (e.g., John 13:34; Romans 13:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; and 1 Peter 1:22), and the teaching in the Church “we are members *one of another*” (Romans 12:5; cf. Ephesians 4:25). Because we call the Faith Baptist garden a “community-building project” on our flyers, *Allelon* captures well the spirit of the endeavor from the beginning stages of planning the garden.

Behind the church building were multiple grass-covered lots, owned for years but hidden from view by overgrown shrubbery and unused by church ministries. A group of young folks began to ask some questions. Why aren’t we using this land? Why don’t our children play outside, instead of in the gymnasium? Could we convert some of the space into a community garden as a way to be better stewards of the church’s resources? If a garden failed, we reckoned, we could offer to hide the evidence by tilling it under and replanting the grass.

After talking through a handful of concerns posed by church committees and some members of the congregation who had ruled out a garden initiative in an earlier era of the church, the garden committee began putting out feelers into the community and asking for feedback. Was this something church members *wanted* to do? Who would be willing to do the difficult, sweaty work of gardening? We talked through our theoretical concerns (about the purpose of the garden and how to deal with inevitable disagreements) as well as practical ones (like who would pay the water bill and whether the garden would have a budget line).

Clipboards were passed around. E-mails sent. Announcements made. And then it began.

Church members with a penchant for gardening began to donate leftover vegetable seeds to our “seed bank,” a basket set out in the church’s reception area. The youth traveled to Anathoth Community Garden in Cedar Grove, North Carolina, on Spring Break and got excited about their potential involvement in the soil at Faith. One teenager planned his Eagle Scout project around the garden initiative. A local farm, unaffiliated with the church, agreed to donate truckloads of compost. A rototiller was borrowed.

And before we knew it, we were standing in the dirt in our Sunday best, singing hymns and praying a prayer of dedication over the season of work that lay ahead.

## THE POTENTIAL OF COMMUNITY GARDENS

Those of us committed to getting our hands dirty knew that this endeavor would be difficult, that we would probably want to give up at some point, that we would spend a lot of time complaining about the fruits of our

labor or lack thereof. But we also held a single conviction firmly: it would all be worth it. Bryan Langlands, who serves as the campus minister at Georgetown College and spearheads the Allelon Garden, maintains four reasons that community gardens like ours have the potential to make a difference in the life of a congregation and its surrounding community.

The first is the *potential for intergenerational ministry*, especially in today's church culture "in which ministry and structured fellowship opportunities are increasingly stratified by age demographics," says Langlands.

A second potential is as *an avenue for outreach into the lives of those residing nearest our church buildings*, those who are often not members of the churches they border. As Langlands notes, "In an age in which churches sometimes consist largely of members who commute in for Sunday worship from elsewhere, such connections with immediate neighbors are important. We have discovered that when we knock on our neighbors' doors to talk to them about our church, giving them a fresh tomato tends to open up many more doors than if we were simply handing out church brochures." After all, who can resist garden-fresh produce?

Community gardens can provide *a much-needed resource to many who otherwise might have limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables*. Their fresh produce can "feed local people who are underresourced and/or who live in food deserts." Many food pantries are happy to take garden produce to distribute to the hungry in their communities.

Additionally, community gardens are a *potential resource for expanding the church community's education and discipleship programs*. Langlands sees gardening as "a teaching tool for church members and neighbors, helping them to learn about the joys of producing your own healthy food." He continues, "Since so many of us are so far removed from the land and food production, gardening can also help to make the many Bible stories that have to do with agriculture come to life." Jesus' parables, for example, are brimming with references to sowing and reaping, good soil and farmers, vineyards, landowners, and the harvest.

Even in our small town, the Allelon Garden is not a unique offering to our community. Within a few blocks of our church, Georgetown College developed a community garden on its campus in 2010. Many of the faculty and staff involved in that initiative were instrumental in starting Allelon, and shared resources between the two—a tiller, for example, as well as a used pick-up truck—were important in getting the church garden started.

A nearby Nazarene church has steadily expanded their community garden since 2010, which was begun as an initiative to get the youth group involved in the local community. Their garden is tended by youth, senior citizens, and life groups, as well as the children's ministry.

Each of these gardens supports the local community, especially, due to the economic crisis in recent years, by donating produce to nearby food pantries. The Nazarene church has donated dozens of vegetable varieties to

food pantries, local schools, and neighbors in the community. The Georgetown College garden donated more than six hundred and thirty pounds of produce last year. Though our local food pantry has readily accepted donations of fresh food—and thus far at least is willing to take as much as we can produce—it is important to note that this is not always the case, especially in more urban areas, where poverty takes on a different glint. Churches in the early stages of planning a garden should always enquire with other ministries to make certain that plans for food distribution are feasible. Nobody wants to be stuck with a hundred pounds of tomatoes! As with most backyard gardens, “when it rains, it pours” when it comes to harvest time.

### **MISSION ACCOMPLISHED**

The mission statement of Allelon Community Garden is “to serve Jesus Christ and to nourish the family of Faith by cultivating Sabbath relationships among church members and those around us, by being a teaching tool for Christian formation, and by growing healthy food for the hungry and for the enjoyment of all.”

In its first growing season Allelon produced over three hundred and fifty pounds of green peppers, lettuce, onions, squash, bush beans, carrots, and tomatoes. The majority of that—more than three hundred pounds—was donated to our local food pantry, and the rest distributed to church members on Sunday mornings, passed out to neighbors of the church through what we called a “free farmer’s market,” or taken home and used by those working in the garden. My freezer, for example, still houses leftover pesto from last year’s bumper crop of basil!

The Eagle Scout project provided us with two spacious raised beds, complete with a variety of prolific herbs, and a water spigot within few feet of the garden, hooked up to the church’s plumbing. Our weeks of carrying water in two-gallon containers across a football field’s worth of yard, followed by weeks of stretching out a double hose and then recoiling it multiple times a week, were thankfully over!

The Allelon garden taught us to overcome fears of spiders, how to tell the difference between tall grass and onion greens, when to pick a small, crookneck yellow squash, and whether green beans and misshapen carrots could be eaten freshly picked. We learned lessons for future growing seasons: not to plant pumpkins in the middle of summer, for example, if you want to harvest them in the fall. Our visions of a fall pumpkin-carving festival fell flat when basketball-sized pumpkins began rotting on the vine in mid-August. Perhaps most of all, the garden taught us stick-to-it-iveness, keeping with a project even as the tedium sets in and the novelty wears off, especially in the heat of a very long summer.

Throughout the discomfort, we clung to the tangible results of our garden: beautiful heads of Romaine lettuce decorating the communion table, impressive pounds of produce we were donating to the food pantry, the joy

on friends' faces as they picked up fresh tomatoes in the church lobby, and teaching people how to use baggies of fresh herbs.

Looking back on Allelon's first growing season and the tangible results linked to our successful harvest, I am struck by the *intangible* results, the things that have been most sustaining and meaningful to those of us who spent hours hunched over in the hot sun, planting and weeding and picking and pinching. Certainly meeting church neighbors and their pets might make a difference in the life of those neighbors as well as in the life of the church. And teaching our children about God's provision in a garden might shape their future career paths, food tastes, and, most importantly, faith journeys.

But it is the relationships cultivated through the work of the garden that enable us to say we have accomplished the Allelon "mission." Relationships are different when they come together over dirt and sweat, rather than donuts and coffee. People are more vulnerable. Admitting you have no idea what a green bean looks like on the vine or how to tell an onion from a tall blade of grass can be a humbling experience.

None of us experts, we learned together about gardening as we failed and succeeded *together*. Our pumpkins may have rotted, but we learned how to prune fruit trees. The cherry tomato plants were much too close together – forming a solid, impenetrable wall – but the basil proliferated. The raised herb beds were too close to the garden fence to fit the lawn mower between them, and rabbits still managed to sneak through the fence, but we spent many a Sunday school hour divvying up fresh herbs into snack baggies to distribute to the congregation.

And it is in working together, in the dirt, in the hot sun, side-by-side, that we have become a better community. We have learned to rejoice with the psalmist, that indeed, "the earth is the LORD's, and all that is in it" (24:1).



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