



Feeding the Hungry from Our Own Backyard

How a Minnesota congregation filled bare shelves at local pantries by tithing the produce from their gardens.

ALAN E. JOHNSON

The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.
Proverbs 22:9, TNIV

At Karmel Covenant Church in Princeton, Minnesota, we began praying and contemplating what it would mean for our rural congregation to “contextualize” its ministry. In other words, what could we contribute to the larger work of God that we were most suited to do? So far, we have discovered several answers, including a live nativity on Christmas Eve in a neighborhood barn, which always draws a large crowd. December marked our sixth year with this activity, and through these years we have purposefully maintained its simplicity. One out-of-state guest said, “Your Christmas event is as simple as our church’s is complex, but I love them both.” We have kept our reenactment, with Scripture reading and carol singing, within thirty minutes,

followed by multiple campfires, hot cider, and neighborhood visiting. Most who attend are from outside the church.

A second ministry falls into the area of mercy, rather than proclamation. Not too many years ago, our Isanti County was exploding with housing growth, but now the building boom has dissipated, leaving many builders and homeowners in crisis. Within a few years, we have gone from being the fastest growing county in Minnesota to being one of the most economically depressed counties in the state.

So on a get-acquainted visit to one of our area food pantries, where the shelves of cans and boxes looked alarmingly bare, I asked the director if anyone had ever brought in fresh garden produce. “No,” he answered, but he was enthusiastic about the idea. He went on to explain that a recent Good Samaritan law now freed contributors from liability related to non-commercial food donations.

The wheels began to turn, and I began to pray about what our next step should be. It was in one of these times that the Holy Spirit instilled the idea of people tithing from their own gardens to area food pantries. As the idea began to circulate, the response was very positive. One couple who had never gardened before added a small garden to their property so they could participate. It was also apparent that this idea could work all across the country, so the ministry was given the name Garden Givers (gardengivers.com), and sharing this idea continues to this day.

As the people of our church tithed in that first year, we collected a thousand pounds of garden produce for the pantries without our having to do much more than promote the idea. Most of the gardeners even brought their own produce to town. But we began to realize that if we added a church garden it would give more visibility to Garden Givers, as well as bring gardeners together in a collective ministry and substantially add to our food production.

So in early spring before our second summer, a dozen of us gathered to consider the prospect of adding a large garden on the church's property. Finding a piece of ground was not our challenge, but determining how productive our sandy soil would be became a concern. As we explored our property for a favorable site, one of our farmers assured us that we could transform whatever plot we chose into a productive garden.

Within weeks we broke the soil with plow and disc, and began spreading wagonload after wagonload of "organic barnyard material." A field that had only yielded a mixture of weeds soon took the shape of a large garden, the size of a gridiron. Then we received another blessing when an elderly couple offered their unused home garden for our use, so we quickly went from one garden to two, in addition to the personal

gardens people were tithing.

First-year gardens are difficult since many latent weed seeds get exposed in the breaking of the soil. Our vegetable production was wonderful, but regular weeding parties were also required, which always included root beer floats. By the end of the season we had delivered about 3,000 pounds of beautiful produce, but we had also pulled what seemed like 10,000 pounds of weeds. We discovered that our sandy soil was an amazing place for gardening, and

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the gardens to coordinate food production.

At the peak of our harvest, many who worked in the garden could only wish their own gardens were doing as well. A hundred-foot row of plants produced about 1,500 green peppers, and we came to realize that God was watch-

ing over these gardens in a special way. We were reminded of Jesus's words, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap" (Luke 6:38, TNIV).



Participants in the Garden Givers ministry display some of the bounty they have raised for local food pantries.

early skeptics became believers.

At the start of the third year, we designated a master gardener to oversee the garden from beginning to end. He invited a local organic farmer to our organizational meeting, who gave us some great ideas and then offered to raise 250 plants of our choice in her greenhouse. We also added some fruit trees, hoping to increase the size of our orchard through the years. As the summer unfolded, we became aware of three other congregations that had also started gardens, so we made plans to meet with leaders of all

At a time when we are not only surrounded by the needy, but many of us are also feeling the pinch, our contextualized gardening ministry has given our congregation an affordable, hands-on way to make a difference that everyone appreciates. We are finding that a church does not have to be rural to do this, so wherever your congregation is located, is a gardening ministry something you might want to consider? ■

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