

Church-Based Community Gardening: Where Mission Meets Ecology in Local Contexts

By Miriam Pepper*

Across Australia and across denominations, growing numbers of local churches are becoming involved in community gardening. Disused tennis courts, car parks and vacant spaces are now places for food growing, for teaching and learning skills, for thriving native plants, for sharing friendship and meals, for mosaics and murals, and for prayer and reflection. Churches' motivations for this activity are many and varied – as are the well-documented individual, social and environmental benefits of community gardening. The contention of this paper is fourfold. Firstly, that community gardening represents a reinvigoration of the mission of local churches, as they find new and relevant ways to embody and proclaim the gospel in context of the particular needs and interests in their broader communities. Secondly, that community gardening draws together several spheres of mission, and that it can enable increased ecological awareness among church congregations and an appreciation of God's all-encompassing love for creation. Thirdly, that in participating in such mission, churches find themselves transformed. And lastly, that community gardening is fertile ground for dialogue across confessional difference. In illustrating these points, the paper will draw particularly upon learnings from a series of ecumenical group visits to 14 church-based community gardens in NSW and the ACT in early 2011, as well as research conducted in 2010 on community gardening in Uniting Churches in the same region.

** Dr Miriam Pepper is a founding member of Uniting Church ecology network Uniting Earthweb and Secretary of multi-faith organisation the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change. She is also a researcher with the National Church Life Survey and an Honorary Fellow at the Australian Catholic University. Her PhD research examined Christianity and sustainable consumption from a social psychological perspective.*

“The main theme appears to be the connection of the people involved... friendships and connections through the earth, the soil, the plants, and its fruits. There is an energy coming from it that is difficult to put into words.”

Participant in inner-Sydney tour of church-based community gardens, 28/5/11, in response to the question: “What have you learned today about church involvement/Christian involvement in community gardening?”

Introduction

This paper is a reflection on the growing grass-roots mission activity that is church-based community gardening, drawing on what I have learned through the “Growing Mission with Community Food” project.

Growing Mission with Community Food was a project of the Uniting Earthweb Group.¹ The project, which ran from July 2010 to June 2011, aimed to encourage and support congregations across the NSW/ACT Synod of the Uniting Church to embark on community food initiatives (e.g. community gardens, food buying groups/cooperatives, food share initiatives).

Our food system in Australia and worldwide is in crisis.² Overuse of the Earth’s resources, environmental degradation, and climate change threaten business as usual. Enormous amounts of food are wasted even as close to a billion go hungry.³ Farmers are walking off their farms and suffering psychological injury.⁴ Community food initiatives – where communities work to feed themselves – are part of the answer. Moreover, such food initiatives are inherently missional, providing opportunities for congregations to build connections with their local communities, as well as to build relationships across generations and cultures. The Growing Mission with Community Food project sought to grow this potential, and to help develop churches’ understanding of our mission to be a foretaste of God’s healing and renewal of all creation.

The project involved:

- Research into church involvement in community food initiatives across the Synod

¹ Uniting Earthweb (www.unitingearthweb.org.au) is a network of Uniting Church people within NSW and the ACT who work for a greater connection between ecology and Christian faith and practice. The Uniting Earthweb Group meets regularly to help support the development of Uniting Earthweb. The Growing Mission with Community Food project was funded by a \$5,000 grant from the Uniting Church (NSW Synod) Mission Resource Fund New Missional Gatherings Seed Fund and was led by me.

² See Julian Cribb (2010) “The Coming Famine”, CSIRO Publishing, for a thorough discussion of the national and global situation. See also Insights, November 2010, for an overview, www.insights.uca.org.au.

³ Households through away over \$5bn of food each year. See David Baker, Josh Fear and Richard Denniss (2009) “What a Waste: An analysis of household expenditure on food”, Australia Institute policy brief no.6, available at www.tai.org.au.

⁴ Three farmers commit suicide every week, see Andrew N. Page and Lyn J. Fragar (2002) Suicide in Australian farming, 1988–1997. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, Vol 24, No 1, pp.81–85. Eight walk off their farms every week, see ABARE (2009) Australian Commodities Statistics 2009, Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Canberra, 2009, www.abare.gov.au.

- Preparation of guidelines and other resources to support churches to get involved in community food initiatives⁵
- A special issue on community food in the November 2010 edition of Insights magazine⁶
- A series of three ecumenical tours (one in south-west Sydney, one in Canberra, Cooma and the NSW south coast, and one in inner Sydney), involving a total of 55 participants, to 14 different community gardens either at churches or set up by Christians.⁷

About Church Involvement in Community Gardening⁸

Community gardens are places in cities and towns where people come together to grow food. As well as spaces for food growing (e.g. individual garden plots, communal garden plots, fruit trees), and associated facilities such as composting, water harvesting and a seed raising area, community gardens often include:

- Community art (e.g. mosaics, sculptures)
- Places for indigenous and native plants, flowers and ornamentals
- Spaces for socialising and celebration (e.g. outdoor seating and eating facilities)
- Spaces for solitude and reflection
- Places for education (e.g. outdoor classrooms)
- Animals (e.g. chickens, bees)

The environmental benefits of local (and often organic) food production are just some of the positives of community gardens. Research has shown that there are manifold others, including⁹:

- Physical and mental health benefits from increased access to/consumption of fresh food, exercise, close contact with natural processes, and participation in community activities
- Environmental education, habitat for wildlife, and green spaces in urban areas
- Enhanced community networks, reduced social isolation, and strengthened relationships across diversity
- Cross-cultural learning and sharing
- Reduced crime and vandalism
- Reduced costs for managing open space

⁵ A publication entitled "Growing mission with community food: A practical resource for church congregations", case studies of churches, and other resources are available at www.unitingearthweb.org.au/explore/community-food.

⁶ Insights is a monthly publication of the NSW/ACT Synod of the Uniting Church, www.insights.uca.org.au

⁷ Six participants attended two of the tours. For the idea of the tours, as well as their format and evaluation, I am indebted to Cameron, J., Manhood, C. and Pomfrett, J. (2010) Growing the community of community gardens: research contributions. In B. Turner, J. Henryks & D. Pearson (Eds.), *Community Garden Conference: Promoting sustainability, health and inclusion in the city, 7-8.October 2010, proceedings*. Available at <http://www.canberra.edu.au/communitygardens/conference-proceedings>.

⁸ This section is taken from Uniting Earthweb Group (November 2010) Growing mission with community food: A practical resource for church congregations, available at www.unitingearthweb.org.au/files/CommunityFood.pdf

⁹ A current and comprehensive bibliography of community gardens research is available at <http://communitygarden.org.au/bibliography>

Recent years have seen growing numbers of churches across Australia, from various denominations, become involved in community gardening. For example, within the NSW/ACT Synod of the Uniting Church, there are at least 15 churches that host/run/cooperate on a community garden project. Almost all of these projects have been established in the last five years. I am aware of nine more Uniting Churches across the Synod that are considering starting community gardens.

Churches have entered into community garden projects for a variety of overlapping reasons¹⁰:

- To build relationships with and across the local community
- To make responsible and creative use of church land
- To care for God's creation in a hands-on practical way
- To serve and equip the needy and marginalised people in the community, such as those who are isolated, unemployed and/or facing food insecurity
- To respond to requests from people who were looking for a place to site their community garden
- To build relationships across generations and cultures
- To (re)invigorate their church's mission, purpose and profile
- To connect together witness and service, right there at the place of worship

Four broad models of organising community gardening have been identified in Uniting Churches across NSW/ACT. The choice of model depends on the particular context (e.g. capacity of the church, needs and interests of the local community). These models are as follows, the first two being the most common¹¹:

- 1) *Church land, church run*: The church runs the community garden, which is on church land. The church has oversight of garden development and operations. People/groups beyond the church are involved in gardening, and to a greater or lesser extent in the organisation and management of the garden (e.g. on the garden committee)
- 2) *Church land, others run*: The community garden is on church land, but run by a group external to the church. There may be greater or lesser church involvement in that group – minimally a liaison person. In some cases, people from within and outside the congregation may participate equally in garden development and management.
- 3) *Church in partnership*: The church works in partnership with other individuals and groups to develop a garden that is not on church land.
- 4) *Existing garden*: The church joins an existing community garden, which is not on church land.

Community Gardening as a Mission Activity

It seems to me that the rapid growth in church-based community gardening represents a reinvigoration of the mission of local churches. Specifically, as I illustrate below, that:

¹⁰ Throughout this project I have had personal in-depth contact with 22 church-based community gardens, 13 of them connected with Uniting Churches.

¹¹ The nine other non-UCA community gardens with which I have had contact fit these four models, with one exception. One garden (a food forest) was established on church land by an external group, and is now run by the church. It could be called a "church land, others establish, church run" model.

- Churches are finding new and relevant ways to embody and proclaim the gospel in context of the particular needs and interests in their broader communities
- Community gardening draws together several spheres of mission, including an ecological sphere, and can enable increased ecological awareness among church congregations and an appreciation of God's all-encompassing love for creation
- Churches are themselves transformed through community gardening
- Community gardening is fertile ground for dialogue across confessional difference

Community gardening is about mission:

Churches fundamentally understand their involvement in community gardening as about connecting with their communities, as a holistic mission activity that extends beyond narrow notions of evangelism to expressing love and concern for the whole person and for the whole community. This idea of community connection was repeatedly picked up by participants in the three community garden tours. As one participant put it:

"I found it very challenging and quite humbling to see the way people are really 'out there' trying to connect with their communities and bringing Christ to the world in very engaging, creative ways."

Participant in inner-Sydney tour of church-based community gardens, 28/5/11

The tour participants remarked on aspects such as the involvement of marginalised groups, non-threatening contact between churches and the broader community, cross-cultural understanding, community ownership, and churches as servants making land available and partnering with others for the betterment of community.

Many wonderful examples of community building are apparent, such as the ministry of the Garden of Eden Community Garden, a ten year mission project at St George's Uniting Church Eden which started in 2006. Among the people involved have been schools, artists, musicians, the Koori community, local farmers (the garden hosts a monthly local produce market), and people out of work who come for work placements organised in conjunction with Mission Australia. Community development is central to this project, and the groups are involved in the visioning, development and maintenance of the garden. Through the heritage walk collaborative project, the congregation is working with people from four other gardens in Eden. And the church has even hosted a visit from Watoto Ugandan Children's Choir, who got in contact because they heard about the garden. In a town with no other community centre, the church is becoming a hub for community life.

More people coming to church has not to date been a major outcome of church-based community gardening – at least, not at this early stage. But the growing relationships between church members and (other) gardeners are often manifest in other ways and provide many opportunities for spiritual sharing, from simple acts of conversation while weeding plots, shared morning teas between churchgoers and gardeners, to joint projects between congregations and garden groups such as fetes and harvest festivals.

This mission is deeply contextual:

Church-based community gardens are highly diverse, in terms of their purposes, their governance, and what is cultivated and done at the gardens themselves.

In Bega, a town with high levels of unemployment and homelessness, Ricky's Place Garden at St John's Anglican Church has been set up to provide food to the church-based community kitchen. In Cooma, where most people have their own backyards, the Cooma Community Garden at Cooma Uniting Church is a demonstration garden of methods of sustainable food production in what is a harsh and variable climate. In the inner city area of Redfern/Waterloo, Eden Garden at South Sydney Uniting Church provides activity and fresh produce for people living with HIV/AIDS.

At O'Connor Uniting Church, the community garden is managed by the Canberra Organic Growers Society, which operates 12 community gardens in the ACT region. At St Michael's Anglican Church in Surry Hills, there is little formal structure. A "food forest", which is a multi-layered food production system designed to be highly productive and to require minimal maintenance, is tended and harvested by church volunteers and community members as they desire.

The Hughes Street Community Garden in Cabramatta, which was set up by the Christian community Urban Concern, involves migrants and refugees from the former Yugoslavia and Indochina. A decision was made early on to opt for what the garden convenor called a "capitalist" method of individual plot holding, avoiding a more "socialist" communal plot organisation which consultation indicated would have caused difficulties for some community members due to painful experiences with land tenure in their countries of origin.

In the wonderful graveyard at St Stephen's Uniting Church, a feature of the Cottage in the Graveyard Community Garden is the productive beehives, given the extensive grounds for bees to forage. Also in Newtown, the Turtle Lane Community Garden is experimenting with growing flowers for St Joseph's Catholic Church.

Each garden is shaped by the particular locality, the interests and capacities of the churches and garden groups, and the community networks that grow and develop.

Mission meets ecology in community gardening:

I do not wish to rehearse here that mission has an ecological dimension – that God's mission, in which the church is called to participate, concerns the reconciliation and renewal of all creation. That argument has been made well in our Australian context by Norman Habel, Clive Ayre and others.¹² It is also clear in the Uniting Church founding document, the Basis of Union¹³, in the Anglican Communion's fifth mark of mission¹⁴, as well as in the

¹² See particularly Ayre, C. (2009) *An Approach to Ecological Mission in and through the Christian Community in Australia: Beyond Apathy to Committed Action*. PhD thesis, University of Queensland.

¹³ The Basis of Union, paragraph 3, states "God in Christ has given to all people in the church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church's call is to serve that end." Available from <http://assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/HistDocs/basisofunion1992.pdf>

¹⁴ The fifth mark of mission is "To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and renew the earth." See <http://acen.anglicancommunion.org/>

mandate of Catholic Earthcare Australia¹⁵. Rather, what I wish to do is to demonstrate how community gardening is a form of ecological mission which also encompasses other spheres of mission.

Church-based community gardening's relationship to what Habel terms the "first" (the saving of souls) and "second" (the whole human being as part of the community) spheres of missions have been discussed above.¹⁶ But what of a "third" (ecological) dimension?

As noted earlier, the environmental benefits of community gardening have been well-documented. And while the reasons for starting a community garden at a church may not be explicitly ecological – whether on the part of the church or an external garden group – I contend that the sheer act of participation in community gardening has ramifications for ecological awareness among gardeners. Digging in the soil, participating in the growing process, learning about organic food production methods¹⁷, appreciating seasonal eating, making productive use of waste streams (even if simply to minimise operating expenses), learning about the functional connections between different plants, insects, microbes, and animals that make gardening work, are all examples of practical ecological consciousness entering into everyday life.

Throughout the Growing Mission with Community Food project, it was not uncommon to hear Christian community gardeners say that community gardening is not so much about the garden but rather about the community. Nevertheless, the community building and community development that constitute community gardening projects are deeply predicated on cultivating a deep connection with soil. Indeed, community gardening is very clearly and explicitly human ecology, with relationships between humans and their natural, social and build environment consciously enacted in a specific place.

If this is the case for gardeners, how about hosting churches, where only a few churchgoers may be directly involved in gardening itself? Is a growing ecological appreciation apparent there? It is early days, but I believe that the ecological connectedness experienced and practised by gardeners is starting to be experienced and practised by church congregations as well, with harvest festivals, fetes/fairs, thanksgiving for creation/blessing of the animals building connections between church and garden and starting to subtly "earth" the worship life of congregations. The potential for a broadening appreciation among churches of God's holistic mission is, I believe, significant.

Community gardening transforms churches:

¹⁵ Catholic Earthcare Australia, an agency of the Catholic Bishops Conference, seeks to respond to "Pope John Paul II's call to 'stimulate and sustain the ecological conversion' throughout the Catholic church in Australia and beyond". See <http://www.catholicearthcare.org.au/mandate.html>

¹⁶ Habel, N.C. (1998) *The Third Mission of the Church*, as cited in Ayre, C. (2009) *An Approach to Ecological Mission in and through the Christian Community in Australia: Beyond Apathy to Committed Action*. PhD thesis, University of Queensland.

¹⁷ Community gardens are typically organic, in no small part because this is the preferred setup by decision making bodies such as local Councils for risk minimisation reasons.

Community gardens are living, evolving projects. Community gardening is about transformation on many levels – in the lives of gardeners, transformation in communities as relationships are strengthened, and most fundamentally, transformation in churches themselves in ways that extend beyond the physical transformation of their grounds. One tour participant expressed her newfound awareness at the transformative potential of community gardens:

“The idea is a basic logical extension of Christianity. I did not think about this / in this way before. It changed my idea of the church from conservative to places of change.”

Participant in Canberra, Cooma and NSW south coast tour of church-based community gardens, 2-3/4/11

GyMEA-Miranda Uniting Church is an inspiring example of what can happen when a church steps out in faith and starts a community garden project. The congregation, together with members of the broader community, has gradually transformed vacant land behind the church into a garden of vegetable plots, fruit trees, flowers and native plants. The congregation has not just been an “agent” of mission, but has found itself deeply caught up in the love and generosity of God. The garden convenor comments:

“The garden is one of the most enthusiastic things to happen at our church for a while. We were going to build an aged care facility on the land, but after years of planning, it fell through – much to our disappointment. The Miranda Community Garden has given us a new lease of life.”¹⁸

Sixteen people from Miranda attended the community garden tours. Their enthusiasm was infectious.

Community gardening presents exciting opportunities for ecumenism:

While the Growing Mission with Community Food project was a Uniting Church endeavour, the community garden tours organised as a part of the project were ecumenical. The 14 gardens visited were hosted by churches from Anglican, Baptist, Church of Christ, Catholic, Salvation Army and Uniting Church traditions. Participants on the tours themselves were also from breadth of traditions.

A striking instance of grassroots ecumenism was realised in the tour of the community gardens at four churches (two Anglican, one Catholic and one Uniting) in inner Sydney, a place where formal ecumenism is often difficult for a range of reasons. At least one of the churches visited, South Sydney Uniting Church, is well known for affirming people of all sexual orientations and identities. As the minister commented in his homily the day after the visit:

¹⁸ Gutherson, B., quoted in Pepper, M (2010) Community gardens: Transforming communities, transforming churches. Insights, November 2010, available www.insights.uca.org.au/features/community-gardens

“We didn’t see people racing about in religious fervour, arguing over denominational or doctrinal differences. We saw a measured and grace-ful sharing of space and possibilities for growth – for friendship, for fruits and vegetables.”¹⁹

Ecumenical cooperation in regards to ecological ministry more broadly is occurring on a range of fronts. An international example is the long-running “Justice, Diakonia and Responsibility for Creation” programme of the World Council of Churches²⁰, and in Australia the recent establishment of an “Eco-Mission Project” under the auspices of the National Council of Churches. Indeed, ecumenism and ecology come from the same base word – *oikos* (Greek, meaning house, habitation). My experiences suggest that there is potential for more conscious ecumenical collaboration as regards community gardening and community food.

The Future of Church Involvement in Community Gardening

The Growing Mission with Community Food project is now complete, yet the activities that it aimed to support have only just begun. The Uniting Earthweb Group hopes that our online resources, people’s learnings from the garden tours, and the “Christians and Community Food” google group established for networking²¹, will continue to assist churches in mission.

Some questions that I believe are pertinent to the future of church involvement in community gardening are as follows:

- What new forms of church involvement in community gardening might we see in coming years? For example, “garden share” activities which connecting garden owners (e.g. older people who are now less mobile) with people who don’t have access to a garden but want to grow food, or “grow zones” where groups of people club together to share skills and tools and help each other to transform their respective gardens?
- Throughout my research, I came across only one church-based community garden that was started and has since ceased. However, it is early days. To what extent will community gardens be sustained at churches in the longer term?
- Community gardening is a grass-roots activity, fuelled by the passions of local people and local churches. But such activity is time-intensive and needs support if it is to flourish. What will our denominational and ecumenical structures do to support and resource this mission frontier further?
- As issues concerning food security, sovereignty and sustainability gather apace right across the world, what role can church-based community gardening play in churches’ growing awareness of a hopeful, faithful Christian witness for today?

¹⁹ Collis, A., May 29 2011, “Speak gently and respectfully”, http://www.southsydneyuniting.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=302:may-29-2011-homily&catid=38:homilies&Itemid=77

²⁰ See www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/justice-diakonia-and-responsibility-for-creation.html

²¹ Access the group at <http://groups.google.com/group/churches-and-community-food>