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Jarrold Longbons
jarroldlongbons@gmail.com

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The Church as a Community of Gardeners

JARROD LONGBONS

God gave us these growing things as signs and symbols of his redeeming love for the whole of creation.
—Vigen Guroian, *Inheriting Paradise: Meditations on Gardening*

Every church should cultivate a garden. I realize this bold claim is found nowhere in scripture, and for many churches strapped for time, funds, and staff, my imperative seems a bit superfluous, to say the least. With limited resources, shouldn't we just focus on the things that matter, like evangelism and children's education?

While we must indeed attend to the needs of God's created people, I argue that as Christians it is our duty to care for all of creation—people as well as the land. *Land* is the Biblical metonym for all of creation and includes all non-human beings: moderns refer to this realm as *nature*. Ellen Davis writes, “[W]hat Leopold calls ‘the land community,’ the biblical writers call ‘heaven and earth.’”¹ That is to say *heaven and earth* is a Biblical idiom denoting all creation. When attentive to the fact that “land” or “heaven and earth” play part in the covenant, one will discover that the Old Testament people of God have always been called to care for the fate of non-human realities. And according to the great narrative of scripture, God is restoring *all* creation; Christians represent those who follow God in that restoration. Therefore, the Christian mission includes more than baptizing people into Christ, which is the reductive way in which many modern Christians understand the Church's purpose. Its mission also includes addressing other issues such as poverty, peace, art, healing, and even ecology.²

My thesis is that church gardens create awareness for Christians to the needs of creation and the costliness of human impact upon what is popularly called the “environment”—what Christian doctrine calls “creation.” More specifically, church gardens offer two important gifts to the church: education and benevolence. But before considering how a garden can help churches with these important aspects of church mission, let me explain my own congregation's use of a community garden.

Menuah Gardens: An Experiment

Man must eat in order to live; he must take the world into his body and transform it into himself, into flesh and blood.

—Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*

This spring marks the fifth season of our church's community garden: Menuah Gardens. *Menuah* is a transliterated Hebrew term meaning “delight” or “tranquility.” It is a word associated with Sabbath. Menuah

1. Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 25. *Heaven and Earth* is a popular Hebrew idiom meaning the whole cosmos.

2. By this I mean that the church has a mandate to care for the poor (i.e. “the least of these”), are called to imitate God by making beautiful things, are called to treat and care for the sick, and are called to make all creation flourish.

Gardens began when my friend Justin Devore asked if we could start one; he wanted a garden, but lived in an apartment. With Justin's leadership, we were off. Without a budget, Menuah relied on worker and parishioner donations for seed and supplies. For our first season we had one small plot, yet the bountiful harvest exceeded all expectations.

That first year changed my life and relationship with food! During one week we harvested 15 varieties of heirloom tomatoes. Lining them up, I sliced them, and then tasted them one by one. Each variety had a different flavor, but they were unmistakably tomatoes; the nuance of flavors provoked my palate—it was pure ecstasy. From then on, I could never enjoy a hybrid, chemically-ripened tomato ever again.³ Nor would I ever again enjoy hydroponically-raised tomato fruit.⁴ So, with a new vigor for flavor diversity, I pushed for the garden's expansion, and every year since we have added more.

Space is not a problem. Our church owns plenty of land that only exists to be mowed.⁵ Each season brings new crops, mostly annuals, but there are a few perennial fruit trees too. After the first two seasons we added the annual "Garden Meal." Now, at our fall kick-off, we enjoy a meal made 90% from our garden.⁶ It is a time of culinary delight. We eat outside under the sun as music plays over outdoor speakers. It is a celebration of the harvest, a festival of God's abundance.

We also take pains to share our food with others. Only 10% of each harvest is set aside for the garden meal. The rest is placed in the foyer for members to take home, or it is packaged and taken to the needy of our community. *Sharing* sums up the purpose of Menuah Gardens. Workers share in the work and the fate of each plant. Even our youth minister moves the youth group—during the summer—out of the classroom and into the garden; there, he teaches while he and the teens pull weeds, harvest fruit, and tend the soil. In addition to the garden meal, our church shares in fresh produce weekly. And our community shares in the joys of healthy, organic food given as a gift to those in need. Importantly, we endeavor to make our garden beautiful—a place for menuah—for those seeking sanctuary, prayer, and meditation.

I must confess, however, that at times we have struggled to make Menuah a successful ministry tool. First, the weather is the uncontrollable factor that any food or plant grower experiences. Last summer we experienced severe heat and drought. Many crops failed. Sometimes watering is not enough, and after a long-term bout of dryness, watering saturated our limited budget. Interestingly, however, this failure proved to be a teaching tool: we are always in need, and life is a mystery beyond human control. The second difficulty was lack of help. In our years of community gardening, we have had times of much help and times of little. Summertime is challenging because of travel, vacation, and sports. And with our expansions, seasons of worker drought put a lot of pressure and work on the few who showed up. But this is an issue of communication, recruitment, and volunteerism. Even in low turnout years, where it seems there is little interest, our congregation would lament the total loss of Menuah Gardens. The issue is not a lack of interest, but rather creating expectations and new opportunities to serve.

3. Out-of-season tomatoes that one finds in a grocery store are usually hybrid varieties grown far away and shipped to grocery stores in large trucks. In the process, these tomatoes are harvested before they are ripe, so that they will last during the commute. Then, the chemical Ethylene (C₂H₄) is applied to them for ripening, all for the purpose of providing out-of-season foods to consumers. Personally, I have found that while hybrids are more pest- and blight-resistant, not to mention more efficient to grow (needing less space), they often lack the depth of flavor that organic fruits and vegetables have.

4. Hydroponic agriculture is the technique of growing vegetables in water instead of the soil. While the fruit often looks perfect—unblemished—they, like hybrids, lack the flavor that comes with the natural effects of growing something in the soil. Indeed, the flavor is less "earthy."

5. If every church converted their mowed land into gardens and/or mini-farms, then there would be immeasurable possibilities for economic and ecological benefit. Indeed, the reality of having churchyards in which the only use is mowing must cause us to ask some important questions about stewardship, not only of the land, but also our budgets.

6. Another five percent is devoted to items that we do not have time or resources to make such as corn chips, and pasta. The other five percent is represented by fish or meat caught or hunted by our members.

Education and Benevolence

The Christian gardener patiently picks sin from the soul's soil and cultivates it with care and attention to the tender new growth of faith.

—Vigen Guroian, *Inheriting Paradise: Meditations on Gardening*

As noted above, community gardens are inherently educational. More than just educating people into the art of gardening, gardens can be deeply and spiritually formative sites for Christian education. How is this so? For starters, gardens teach that life is always beyond our reach. We cannot control life. No matter how much we understand a plant, take care of the soil, nurture it, and so on, we will never be able to make it grow. All we can do is help it along. Can there be any greater lesson in our own age? Indeed, we live in a time of human desire for mastery over all things via human technique and invention. This is the truth of modern, industrialized farming. We try to control the soil and pests with chemical fertilizers, genetically modified seed, and pesticides. Monsanto has even bio-engineered “Roundup Ready®” seeds, a hybrid that resists herbicides. Not only have companies created a seed that can withstand poison, but they also claim to own something that is alive. These seeds are patented. Owning and controlling life—hasn’t *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus* or *Jurassic Park* taught us anything? We now have similar, unforeseen, unintended effects: soil erosion, inhumane animal treatment, the prominence of monocultures and thus the eradication of certain plant varieties, etc.

Another benefit of community gardening is in the name: community. In a technological⁷ world of endless connection, people are ironically more alone than ever before.⁸ Social media may be social, but it does not build community. Real community is embodied. And I can think of no better way to foster community than to get people together, physically, to share in a common fate. This is the essence of community gardening. To be a part requires one to be present with others, get one’s hands dirty, and to wait with others for either a successful bounty or barren failure. Simone Weil writes about community and a sense of rootedness:

a human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future...reciprocal exchange by which different sorts of environment exert influence on one another are no less vital than to be rooted in natural surroundings.⁹

A third lesson concerns the costliness of eating. Norman Wirzba has often pointed out that to eat means that something had to die.¹⁰ This is a basic reality, but a startling realization for those of us in contemporary society. Today, we are disconnected from our food and its sources; if we run out, then all we need to do is go to the store and buy more. We barely give it more than a passing thought as to where our food comes from and how it is raised or grown. Being so disconnected, we often let food spoil in our refrigerators and pantries. First world problems!¹¹ Gardening can teach us about limits and about the cost of human survival; simply, it creates a reverence for life.¹² My wife and sister-in-law hosted a friend over one Labor Day weekend (who

7. See the work of Albert Borgmann, especially *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), and *Technology and Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). In these works he calls our contemporary technological world a hyperreal world, which is his term for a society that is changed by virtual reality and social interactions that are mediated by technology.

8. See Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

9. Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1952), 43.

10. See “Reavis Lecturer Norman Wirzba: A Theology of Eating,” We Are Campbell <http://wearecampbell.tumblr.com/post/32047739686/normanwirzba> (accessed 12/12/13).

11. See “First World Problems,” YouTube: <http://youtube/vN2WzQzxuoA> (accessed 2/13/13).

12. Without direct connections with plants and food, it is easier for contemporary people to dichotomize nature from supernature—simply put, under our current lifestyle, grace is far removed from daily lives.

had never gardened before). During the visit they planned to prepare a meal with their visitor by first harvesting vegetables from the garden. As their visitor dug up potatoes, she was enchanted, declaring, “This is changing my life. I am only going to take as much as we’ll eat, no more than that!” And indeed, it did change her life. Now she and her husband garden for much of their diet. And when they do not use their garden, they are very intentional about where their food comes from and how it is grown/raised. Eating is costly. Food is costly. By getting closer to one’s food sources, people learn humility, patience, and—most of all—care.

The second thing gained by churches that garden is a greater ability for benevolence. Many churches have a food pantry stocked by a local food bank. This, no doubt, is a good step in assisting the needy. But if your pantry is like most, then it is full of pre-packaged, processed, unhealthy food snacks. Rarely do food banks and church pantries offer fresh fruits and vegetables—the essentials of a healthy diet.

Our pantry has been expanded by Menuah Gardens. During the growing season, pantry visitors can take fresh food home along with their Little Debbie snack cakes and frozen dinners. In the winter months, many of these healthy foods are frozen in airtight bags and kept in our freezer, so we can continue augmenting the items donated by food banks. Even a small garden plot can assist the church’s mission to feed the hungry—and in more healthy ways to boot.

In addition to simple benevolence, our church has had the fortune of teaching people how to use fresh ingredients in their daily cooking. We are pleased to have two chefs as parishioners.¹³ Each fall, they host a “Culinary Club” that incorporates ingredients from the garden. They teach basic knife skills, flavor pairings, and cooking methods so students can learn how to use real, fresh ingredients and have a healthier, more hospitable home. And like our garden meal, the Culinary Club climaxes its class by preparing a Christmas dinner, open to church members and outsiders, every December. Indeed, the benefits of gardens in education, benevolence, and pure delight are almost immeasurable.

Imago Dei: Humans as Gardeners

The gardens that have graced this mortal Eden of ours are the best evidence of humanity’s reason for being on Earth.

—Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*

Much is made of the biblical doctrine *imago dei*. Some suggest that this means that humans are relational. Others emphasize the truth that humans are the only “free” animals, ergo the image must imply freedom. Still others boast human rationality as the essence of the *imago dei*. Ultimately, all of these elements represent something true about the doctrine. For now, I wish to suggest that these truths make it possible for humans to *be* and *do* their God-ordained purpose on behalf of creation. What is this purpose? Is it not to be gardeners? More traditional language calls humans the “priests of creation,” as argued by thinkers such as Alexander Schmemmann¹⁴ and Rowan Williams.¹⁵ This means that as image-bearers endowed with freedom, rationality, and relationality, humans are the creatures called to orientate all other bits of (un-free) creation to the Creator in quotidian life. This priesthood orientation is obvious with events such as the Lord’s Supper, child-rearing, and art, but perhaps most clearly it can be seen in the art of gardening.

Wirzba argues that God was the first gardener—creating, keeping, and caring for the first garden, Eden (“delight”).¹⁶ At one climax of the story, God puts his icon into the garden, via the creation of humans—

13. The chefs in our congregation have a personal business called “Garden Fresh Chefs.” To learn more about their work see their blog: <http://gardenfreshchef.blogspot.com>.

14. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (New York, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1963), 15.

15. Rowan Williams, “Renewing the Face of the Earth: Human Responsibility and the Environment,” *The Archbishop of Canterbury*, March 25, 2009, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/816/renewing-the-face-of-the-earth-human-responsibility-and-the-environment> (accessed: 1/7/12).

16. See Norman Wirzba’s “Gardening with God,” *The Huffington Post*, July 12, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/norman-wirzba/gardening-with-god_b_643479.html (accessed 1/7/12).

imago dei.¹⁷ Margaret Barker argues that the creation story is a temple story. For her, understanding the temple “is the key to recovering what the Bible really teaches about the creation.”¹⁸ Like the temple, creation was constructed to be God’s abode. And like the temple, creation too has an image or icon of the divine stamped within it—in creation, this image/icon is the human. In the garden, the true temple of God, divine image-bearers are created to care for the garden and all of its citizens; as priests,¹⁹ humans orientate all life (soil, plants, animals, and insects) toward God, thus fulfilling their ultimate end—glorification of the Creator. So if God is the first gardener, and humans are made in God’s image and implanted in God’s garden in order to care for it, then the *imago dei* implies that humans are gardeners too. Another way to put this is that the foundational human vocation is to care for, maintain, and ultimately make flourish what God has created and is still sustaining.²⁰ Like a priest, the gardening human offers the fruits of the earth back to God, even if it is something that she consumes.

It is certainly difficult for humans to realize this vocation in a world where food is a commodity or even something more sinister, like a weapon.²¹ It is impossible to realize our place when we are disconnected from sources of life such as the soil. If the term *religion* means “to bind back,” as in to bind back to a source, what could be more religious than gardening? For in gardening, one is always brought back to the soil, to the humus, which is—at least in the Biblical narrative—the source from which God made humans (Gen 2:7). Any attempt to “meet the expectations of the land”²² creates in us a sense of humility. There is no irony to the closeness of these words: humus, humans, humility. Gardening, therefore, is an inherently spiritual activity. It demonstrates our closeness to the earth and the attitude that we should take in relation to other creatures.

Every church should grow a garden. To be fair, “a simple return to archaic or agrarian life is impossible,” as Wirzba rightly notes, but he continues “it is imperative that we recover, albeit in a new way, a sense for the human identification with the wider universe”;²³ the church as a community that gardens does just this. Gardens bring people together as they teach deep, creational truths. Having one will not only aid a congregation in feeding the poor, but it will also help Christians to understand anew what it means to be human creatures in God’s world, which is extremely countercultural in a time where we think that the world may belong to and be controlled by us.

To conclude, I’ll share another story. A year ago, a college student came to me explaining that he was feeling spiritually dry. Immediately I told him, “You need to start gardening with us.” He began slowly but, in time, he got the hang of it. I’ll never forget the day when, after working in the garden, he approached me and said, “It is like everything is sacred—even the air in front of my face feels thick. I am not sure if this is right, but I think I can feel God everywhere.” I was pleased. “Yes,” I said, “everything in the world is sacred, God has made it all, and all of it is very good!”

17. See N.T. Wright’s portion of the video “Science and Genesis” on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bKa92eLkQM> (accessed: 1/7/12).

18. Margaret Barker, *Creation: A Biblical Vision for the Environment* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 34.

19. See John D. Zizioulas’ “Proprietors or Priests of Creation?,” St. Paul’s Greek Orthodox Church, <http://www.stpaulsirvine.org/html/proprietororpriest.htm> (accessed 1/7/12).

20. For an interesting take on the Genesis mandate for human dominion over creation see Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 42–65. There she argues that the word *dominion* used in Genesis 1 cannot mean domination, but “ruling with,” and “watching” creation like a shepherd. The language has more to do with gentle care than with despotic mastery. Additionally for my point, we must note that the doctrine of creation means more than first origins: it also includes items such as “sustaining,” referring to God’s persistent role in, with, and for creation. This implies the incarnation as much as it does the original let there be.

21. “War and Peace: Food: A Weapon,” *Time*, March 31, 1941, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,765334,00.html> (accessed 1/7/12).

22. *Meeting the Expectations of the Land: Essays in Sustainable Agriculture* is the title of a book by Wes Jackson and Wendell Berry, edited by Bruce Coleman, (New York: North Point Press, 1985). It is a helpful collection of essays on the modern condition of agriculture in the United States of America.

23. Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7.

I am blessed to report that because of gardening, at least one young man renewed his vigor for faith. It taught him that “life is a miracle,”²⁴ a truth very difficult to discern when one is bound to sterile boxes called homes and when relationships are mediated to us by technology, i.e. Facebook. Every church should grow a garden, for if it does not change your congregation by means of education and benevolence, at least it will help the younger members—whose lives have been shaped by convenience, commodity, and consumerism—learn more about the gift that is life and the joy that is food.

In an age where *green* is a buzzword and a fad to help your institution’s public image, there is scarcely anything greener than gardening. And if your congregation is interested in Earth stewardship, *creation care*, or just plain eco-justice, gardens will ignite your people’s imaginations more than a simple recycling program. Though recycling and energy use is important for a more sustainable ecological reality, gardening actually teaches Christian faith better and promotes something better than sustainability: it calls us to and promotes the flourishing of all life.

JARROD LONGBONS IS AN ASSOCIATE MINISTER AT NORTHSIDE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN BLOOMINGTON, ILLINOIS, AND IS A PHD CANDIDATE IN THEOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM; HE RESEARCHES THE AREAS OF ECOLOGY, CREATION, AND THE CHURCH (JARRODLONGBONS@GMAIL.COM).



24. See Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2001), 3–12.