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# Outdoor sanctuaries: Churches find potential in their property

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## Ministry flourishing in church lawns and fields

By *Donna Frischknecht Jackson* | *Presbyterians Today*

It's a weekday afternoon in Parsippany, New Jersey. The bumper-to-bumper morning commute has long been over; the harried evening rush home has yet to begin. Still, the traffic whizzing by Parsippany Presbyterian Church has not let up — nor will it. “Thousands of cars” easily pass by the church daily, the Rev. Donald A. Bragg explains.

Like many 18th century buildings that have been spared the wrecking ball of development, the church — founded in 1755 — now sits on a major thoroughfare known as U.S. Route 46. As one of New Jersey's notoriously congested roads — a 2014 Department of Transportation report cited 40% of the Garden State's roads to be operating at or near capacity — Route 46 has become even busier in recent years, with families seeking a better quality of living that is still commutable to Manhattan. Parsippany lies just 30 miles west of the city.

Yet beyond the busyness of the road in front of the church lies a surprising secret garden of sorts known as Parsippany Presbyterian's Meadow Garden. It's a space where native plants have been allowed to grow back, where wildflowers provide much-needed pollen and nectar for bees, and



Lori Mercer helps harvest wheat that was planted around the perimeters of Emmanuel Farm, a ministry of Emmanuel Presbyterian Church in Bothell, Wash., that focuses on sustainable farming

where chickens — “Yes, we have chickens running around the church,” Bragg says — scratch at the ground foraging for insects. techniques. Courtesy of Emmanuel Presbyterian Church

Parsippany Presbyterian’s property wasn’t always this magical. “A large part of the property was neglected,” said Bragg, who came to the church as pastor 23 years ago.

In 2014, the congregation took a closer look at the potential of its property. A walk around it revealed places where garbage was being dumped and where weeds were choking native flowers that once bloomed. In addition to the property that was neglected and abused, there was also a budgetary matter to consider. “We have a lot of property and it was a lot to maintain,” said Bragg. “Why not return most of it back to nature, rather than spending thousands of dollars to keep part of the property well-manicured?”

The idea of a Meadow Garden emerged and began with the transformation of the church’s 50-foot-by-50-foot picnic area into plots to grow an abundance of vegetables. Herbs were also planted that would then be dried and packaged and sold through the church. Five additional gardens were established solely to help nature’s pollinators — including butterflies, beetles and the most vulnerable of all pollinators, the bee. Bragg’s interest in bees led to the addition of five hives on the church property, where the pastor-turned-beekeeper now collects and bottles the honey for his church family and community. Of course, one cannot forget the chickens, Bragg laughs.

The Meadow Garden has not only become a refuge for those in Parsippany in need of a little green therapy in an ever-growing asphalt jungle, it has also provided educational and spiritual opportunities for all ages. For example, when eggs from the church chickens became available, Bragg says he was asked by someone in the church if they were safe to eat because they didn’t come in a Styrofoam egg carton from a store. Bragg also intentionally placed one of the pollinator gardens near the church’s playground so that children could see the butterflies and not be scared of the bees. In the summer, the youth make meals using the produce grown in the garden while the preschoolers enjoy growing their own popping corn, Bragg says, adding that “they are all learning to appreciate nature.”

This appreciation is important especially as land keeps getting gobbled up by developers. Before the Meadow Garden came into being, Bragg said someone wrote to the local newspaper that something should be done with “the useless piece of property across the street from the church” and that it should “be paved over.”

Today, the ever-growing community of Parsippany is probably relieved that that editorial didn’t go any further than ink on newsprint.

In 2018, roundtable discussions in the town’s master planning study, which examined the requirements of New Jersey’s Municipal Land Use Law, revealed that residents were concerned with increasing traffic congestion and pedestrian safety. They were also eager for their community to be better able to connect with one another. Parsippany Presbyterian has done just that with its Meadow Garden.

“You have to be serious about being the church. Can this church be a living, organic community? A place to care for one another — and care for the bees and insects as well?” Bragg asked.

### **The value of green space**

A church’s property is increasingly becoming a valuable ministry to its neighbors. No matter how large or small the property, churches can find ways to turn their space into creation labs, that is, going beyond the community garden trend or just planting a few flowers out front and offering educational opportunities to learn how to care for bees, regenerate soil, welcome back native flowers — and perhaps, more importantly, provide outdoor sanctuaries for people

to reconnect with nature and with one another.

According to a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency study, walkable open green spaces are “socially valuable,” drawing people outside and fostering social interactions. The United States is especially seeing this need for community that can meet openly and with enough space to social distance from one another during the COVID-19 crisis.

Keeping bees is a passion of the Rev. Donald A. Bragg. The pastor of Parsippany Presbyterian Church has five hives now on the church property. Honey is collected and bottled and shared with the congregation and community. Courtesy of Parsippany Presbyterian Church

For Emmanuel Presbyterian Church in Bothell, Washington, the question of how to be good stewards of its three acres led to some surprising answers. “We were grappling with how

to use our space, and how to do it in a way that also welcomed the community,” said Lori Mercer, a member of Emmanuel Presbyterian.

Bothell is similar to Parsippany, New Jersey, in that the community is getting “densely populated,” says Mercer.

“We are leading an increasingly disconnected lifestyle. The porches have gone away. Space is evaporating. And so how do we make use of our church property to connect with one another?” she asked.

With the church’s park-like setting being a “gemstone,” a dog walking park was suggested. However, Mercer, having enrolled in a graduate program in 2016 to study sustainable agriculture, had something else in mind: growing food for the vulnerable in the area — which Mercer knows is just an immediate band-aid, stressing that the real work is to eradicate poverty — and to grow the food using techniques that care for the Earth.

Sustainable farming wasn’t a hard sell for Emmanuel Presbyterian as the topic is “hugely relevant” in the Pacific Northwest. “Climate change is on everyone’s mind,” Mercer said.

In the spring of 2018, Emmanuel Farm was created. Ground was broken, seeds were planted and raised beds — with

“lips on the edges, allowing seniors a comfortable place to sit as they garden,” Mercer says — were built. The adventure in sustainable food production began and soon broadened to include classes on canning and seed saving. Among the highlights of Emmanuel Farm has been the planting of wheat within the fence line of the farm, which led to the baking of many loaves of communion bread.

“Since a few congregational bakers started baking communion bread with our homegrown Edison wheat, it’s been fascinating to see how many iterations have sprung forth, all delicious!” Mercer wrote on the church’s Emmanuel Farm’s blog page. “What’s so compelling is the variety — just another reminder that there is no one right way to do pretty much anything. Each loaf reflects each baker’s level of experience, risk tolerance, creativity and preferences.”

The planting and harvesting of the wheat was a celebration in itself, as many strains of wheat do not fare well in the maritime climate of Washington, Mercer says. However, Mercer learned of the Bread Lab at Washington State University in Burlington, Washington, which develops wheat that would thrive in the area. Emmanuel Farm’s harvest was a success, and when it came time to harvest, it was done after church the old-fashioned way — hand-winnowed and hand-chaffed.

While Emmanuel Farm might seem to be a major undertaking, Mercer said, “It’s not a huge endeavor. We have five serving on the farm committee and about nine volunteers who routinely help out in the gardens.” Of course, getting more people involved to help is a “challenge.” But more people will be needed as the vision of Emmanuel Farms continues to grow.

“One of our projects is to put up cover crops in the winter,” said Mercer. Cover crops such as ryegrass, crimson clover and oats are a key part of sustainable farming, adding nitrogen to the soil without the need for chemical fertilizers. Cover crops also offer natural ways to reduce soil compaction and manage soil moisture.

For now, Mercer is looking forward to all the possibilities still to be tilled at Emmanuel Farm, like continuing the educational opportunities for children. Last summer’s Vacation Bible School was held at the farm and lessons were taught to the children on microbes in the soil and what good insects are.

“There are lots of biodiversity and symbiotic relationships we can learn from as we farm,” Mercer said, adding, “To love God is to love God’s Creation. Emmanuel Farm has become our spiritual laboratory.”

### **A food forest feast**

For years, Southern Heights Presbyterian Church in Lincoln, Nebraska, was holding two acres of land it was gifted — unused green space, says the Rev. Leanne Masters — that the congregation thought would someday be used to expand its ministries in the traditional sense of building bigger facilities.

But in 2011, when the church entered into a partnership with Community Crops, a nonprofit in Lincoln, expansion began looking less like brick-and-mortar and more like a space for the community to come garden.

“There are not a lot of places left anymore for people to garden,” said Masters. The garden would be a refuge and a place where the community could gather. But it didn’t take long for the folks at Southern Heights Presbyterian and Community Crops to dream even bigger, and soon the conversations moved away from just offering garden plots to the public to creating a “food forest.”

The simplest definition of a food forest, also called a forest garden, is a diverse planting of edible plants that mimics the ecosystems and patterns found in nature. A food forest would have, for example, fruit and nut trees, shrubs, herbs, vines and perennial vegetables, which all work together in ways that are low-maintenance and sustainable.

“A food forest is an older understanding of planting in which everything works together and helps one another grow. The plants feed each other,” said Masters.

Just as Southern Heights Presbyterian and Community Crops were about to start to work on the groundbreaking food forest — preparing to plant the first fruit and nut trees in 2014 — the congregation was approached by a funeral home to purchase the church’s two acres so that a chapel could be built.

After much discernment, the vision of the food forest won. It has since seen a lot of growth — no pun intended, Masters says.

Southern Heights Presbyterian Church in Lincoln, Neb., made the choice to turn a vacant piece of property into a food forest for all the community to enjoy and learn from. Signage helps visitors explore the many fascinating intricacies of how flora and fauna coexist. Courtesy of Southern Heights Presbyterian Church

In addition to an organic forest filled with fruit and nut trees, strawberries, radishes and raspberries, to name just a few of the edibles growing in the area that anyone in the public may enter, walk and eat from, there is also an outdoor classroom that was created with the help of Nature Explore, a Lincoln-based company that develops outdoor classroom programs and curriculum.

This educational component was important to Masters, who notices how the growing city is devouring precious green space.

“Our kids are not outside anymore. They are not playing in the dirt,” said Masters.

Masters is quick to point out that the creation of the Southern Heights Food Forest is not the sole work of the church but done in partnership with the community.

“I don’t have all the skills to do this, nor does the church have all the volunteers. We are not meant to do this alone. This is a partnership. Southern Heights Presbyterian is coming at this as a spiritual team. It is not a matter of will this get people in our pew,” she said.

Rather, the food forest is about modeling how to be good stewards. “We’ve been commanded to be good stewards, and this includes how we use the church’s land.”

And good stewards Southern Heights Presbyterian has been. As Lincoln’s first publicly accessible food forest — featuring not just pathways, an outdoor classroom, an extensive pollinator garden and more than 50 community garden plots — it is in a prime location, right off a fairly busy street where a public transit stop is frequently used. And yet, when the public steps a few feet into the food forest, there is only peace and quiet.

“The food forest is less noisy than one would think,” said Masters, adding, “And there has been an increase in the number of birds, butterflies, bees and other animals. It has been an amazing journey.”

*Donna Frischknecht Jackson is editor of Presbyterians Today.*

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**“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” — John 1:14**

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