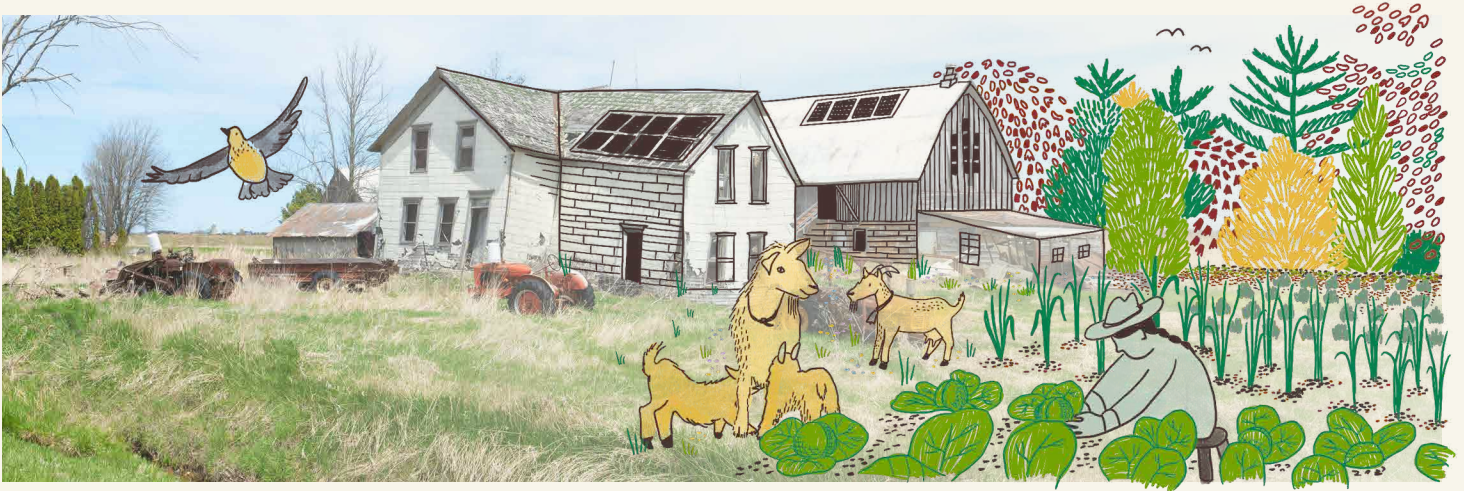


FAITHLANDS TOOLKIT

A Guide to Transformative Land Use



AGRARIAN TRUST

FAITHLANDS TOOLKIT

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Welcome to FaithLands, an initiative to engage faith communities in ecological stewardship and reparative justice through the land. FaithLands is an invitation to join us in envisioning a world where land held by religious institutions is transformed into sustainable gardens and farms for the greater good of the land and all who depend on its bounty for sustenance and well-being. We believe faith communities are uniquely positioned in community and in their theological foundations to look at the land they own—the grounds of the congregations, synagogues, mosques, and churches; the retreat centers and places of worship that rest on arable or ancestral land—and to ask, How could this land be used to honor our connection to all that is, and our role in supporting a vibrant community? What is the untold story of how this land came to be in our possession? What is its origin? From whom was it taken and from whom was it withheld?

FaithLands offers a space to ask and answer, How can we use this land to repair relationships, to redress the wrongs of our ancestors, to heal the life within the soil? And, what would be the most just use of this land?

The FaithLands Toolkit serves as a guide to support faith communities in considering their respective spiritual traditions linking those core values and beliefs to the land. Through case studies and thoughtful conversation, it offers ways to join a growing number of faith traditions in the production of food, the support of basic human needs, and the building of resilient communities while also promoting equity and justice through the land. As you delve into the toolkit, we invite you to keep in mind the questions posed in this introduction to better understand your faith community's opportunities to address this political, social, and environmental moment in ways that will honor your deepest beliefs and traditions.

Welcome to FaithLands!

WHAT IS FAITHLANDS?



The FaithLands initiative and this toolkit support partnerships between farmers, faith communities, and food systems in celebration of our interconnectedness to one another and our common home.

A growing number of faith communities are opening their lands to food production as part of a global movement toward resilience and renewal. Doing so deepens and enlivens the community's connection to each other, the source of all life, and humanity's greatest challenges. By partnering with faith groups, beginning farmers and farmers who have faced discrimination are gaining access to land and the ability to realize their visions of abundance.

Together, with the support of the [FaithLands initiative](#), faith communities and farmers are increasing food security, regenerating landscapes, building climate resilience, and repairing racial, economic, and social injustice.

Faith leaders seeking to **engage community members in making land available to farmers**

Faith leaders seeking to **engage their communities in reconciliation, reparative justice, and land return**

Faith groups interested in **starting a community garden or other land-based enrichment opportunity for their members**

Members of faith communities **seeking models for land justice and land stewardship** to share with their leaders and congregations

Members of faith communities **seeking tools to persuade their leadership** to implement faithlands projects

Individuals **seeking models for righting wrongs to land and people**

Communities and individuals seeking inspiration, information, and resources for **supporting farming, gardening, and ecological renewal on their land**

Farmers interested in **engaging a faith community in a land access partnership**

Organizations and individuals who provide land access assistance to farmers and **want help thinking through how to approach a faith community**

WHO SHOULD USE THIS TOOLKIT?

WHY SHOULD MY FAITH COMMUNITY THINK ABOUT LAND?

Land is the source of life. Without land, and without those who farm it, there can be neither ceremony nor food. Anyone who eats, anyone who prays, anyone who lives from the earth should be thinking about land.

Land has a history. For every tale of settlement, there is a tale of dispossession; for every tale of wealth, there is a tale of labor. The land carries these stories. Redressing historic wrongs—actions in contradiction to the central tenets of ethical and spiritual teachings—requires a truthful reckoning with the land's history.

Land has a future. Reconnecting with land and agriculture, and enabling others to reconnect with and access land for farming and ceremony, is crucial to protecting the future of the land and all who live from it.

Landowning congregations, communities, and individuals can:

Lease land to farmers or farming organizations.

Donate land (or proceeds from the sale of land) to farmers or farming organizations.

Return land to dispossessed peoples.

Partner with a land trust or other qualifying organization to protect land, and/or to make land accessible for farming or other land-based practices.

Start their own sustainable farm or gardening projects.



WHAT ROLE CAN WE PLAY?

All congregations, communities, and individuals can:

Support farmers and land-based organizations in their local communities and nationally.

Advocate for sustainable land stewardship, equitable land access, and land justice.

HOW SHOULD WE USE THIS TOOLKIT?

Envision and set goals focused on a specific project.

Find inspiration in the work other faith communities are doing.

Connect land and justice to spiritual practice and read teachings from diverse faith and farm leaders.

Learn more about specific models or approaches, such as leasing to a farmer or partnering with a land trust.

Explore the advantages, challenges, and considerations for particular strategies or approaches.

Discover prospective partners.



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An aerial photograph of a dense forest with a narrow path winding through it. The trees are lush green, and the path is a mix of dirt and fallen leaves. The lighting creates a dappled effect on the forest floor.

A.

TEACHINGS

ROOTING LAND AND JUSTICE IN SPIRITUAL TRADITION

In these essays and sermons, leaders and teachers explore the theological and spiritual foundations of equitable, engaged, and sustainable farming and stewardship of the land.

Being in Good Relationship: Land, Life, and Indigenous Peoples

Waziyatawin

When the thunders return, marking the beginning of the Dakota new year, they reenergize all beings who share the lands and waters with us and remind us how wondrous creation truly is. Here in *Minisota Makoce* (Land Where the Waters Reflect the Skies), the thunders usually come back in March. Within a few months, life returns to our northern climate, observable all around us as a lush greenery fills our panoramic vision. May is our planting moon. When I prepare our garden beds, I am reminded each moment of the power of life. Living beings want to live. If we don't interfere with their mission, they will flourish. If we don't poison them or destroy their habitat, they will thrive.

Unfortunately, Western culture and many dominant religious traditions have historically viewed creation in terms of a hierarchy, in which human beings are the pinnacle and the rest of creation is below. This runs contrary to Indigenous perceptions of our place in the universe. Our wisest elders tell us that even the smallest beings are our teachers. It is in our best interest to learn from them because they know far more than we can ever hope to know. And because we recognize all life has a spiritual essence, it is our responsibility to honor that and stay in good relationship with all of creation. With this in mind, I cannot conceive of myself as a land steward.

Instead, I would like human beings to envision themselves as land and water protectors. In the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic, when people shut down factories and stopped drilling for oil, flying in airplanes, and driving cars, we immediately saw the earth's capacity to heal herself. If we care about creation, our first goal is to stop doing harm and do everything within our power to stop others from doing harm. Industrial civilization is hopelessly unsustainable. It destroys life. Either we commit to preserving a civilization that destroys the very things it needs to survive—clean water, clean air, and topsoil—or we commit to supporting life so that clean water, clean air, and good topsoil continue to support and nourish us.

An ethic of sustainability is rooted in our spirituality and our recognition that we are related to all of creation.

For Indigenous Peoples, the destruction of our homelands directly coincides with our dispossession. On a global level, wherever Indigenous populations have been displaced or removed, biodiversity suffers. Over millennia, Indigenous people learned to live on the same landbase without destroying it. An ethic of sustainability is rooted in our spirituality and our recognition that we are related to all of creation. In today's context, this means that conversations about restoring health to land are inseparable from issues of Indigenous land justice. First and foremost, Indigenous people must have access to our Indigenous homelands.

As faith communities grapple with issues of ethical land stewardship, I invite them to consider Indigenous connection to whatever land they attempt to steward. Some Indigenous nation was displaced for settlers to access that land. Those same displaced nations now often suffer from food insecurity and poor health, even when much of what is grown today in what is now known as the United States originally came from Indigenous peoples.

Within our Minnesota homeland, agricultural lands are dominated by fields of industrially raised GMO corn. Settler farmers and their increasingly corporatized descendants have plowed the land year after year, depleting the topsoil and initiating a desertification of our once fertile lands. In recent decades, they have installed enough drain tile to change the entire hydrology of southern Minnesota.

In a time when we should be keeping as much water in the land as possible to support climate resiliency, water here drains into the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers and down to the Gulf of Mexico. Growing corn industrially in Dakota homeland is a toxic mimicry of our traditional corn-growing practice, while the vast majority of Dakota people still live in exile. The irony and injustice may seem obvious when it is pointed out, but it has seemingly remained invisible to generations of farmers.

From an Indigenous perspective, ethical considerations are aplenty. In addition to the need for access to farmlands within our homelands, I ask landowning faith communities to carefully consider farming practices and what to do with profits or foods produced on Indigenous lands. Applying Indigenous ethics requires that no harm is done and that biodiversity is honored: no poisons, no destruction or loss of topsoil, no drain-tiling. It means embracing polyculture practices that support diverse plant and microbial life and thinking about long-term responsibility to the land and ecosystem (measured over centuries, not next year's profit). When food and farm products are produced on Indigenous land, a portion of profits made by landowning faith communities could be used to pay rent to the Original People of the land, or contribute to a land buy-back for the Original People. A portion of the produce could be contributed to Indigenous communities who may have limited access to fresh foods today.

If Indigenous people are included in these important conversations about ethical land usage at their inception, wonderful possibilities can be brainstormed and emerge to disrupt business-as-usual practices and set a new course toward justice. This would be good for people and the land.



Waziyatawin is a Dakota writer, teacher, and justice advocate from the Pezihutazizi Otunwe (Yellow Medicine Village) in southwestern Minnesota. She is a scholar and author of books including What Does Justice Look Like? The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland, as well as the executive director of Makoce Ikikcupi, a reparative justice project supporting Dakota reclamation of homeland.

Black Christian Churches: The Foundation for Black Food and Land Security

Alexander
Clemetson



The coronavirus pandemic has fundamentally shifted what it means to gather as a church community and has forced us to reframe our approach to offering the salvation of Christ. In this context, Christians have had to wrestle with what it means to provide the love of God without visiting others or gathering together in person. This reimagining must extend beyond traditional worship services and into the realm of food justice ministry. Illnesses rooted in systemic health disparities have caused the Black community to be disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. A definitive stance must be taken by the Black church and Christians in general to combat racism, systematic oppression, and the devastating effects of food apartheid. As Rev. Dr. Heber Brown III notes, the Black church “is the oldest constellation of Black-led institutions in the country that provides spiritual, economic, and political autonomy for people that rarely find such dynamics in ample supply elsewhere.” With this in mind, we must take a hard look at why these disparities in health and food access continue to exist and develop solutions as alternatives to Black suffering.

Black Christians must acknowledge how land and religion have been used as tools of oppression and manipulation. The orchestrators of chattel slavery co-opted Christianity to justify the theft of African people from their homeland. While enslaved, Black people were forced to work in opposition to nature. Blood spilled on harvested crops, lives were lost on the journey of escape, and food rejected by slave masters served as one of the only forms of sustenance for those in bondage. Our relationship to land is rooted in devastatingly oppressive and dehumanizing practices, the source of our deep-seated disconnection from food and food production. African Americans were kept from controlling the food systems they depended on through laws, policies, and practices rooted in racial oppression. Such acts of theft include the loss of 90 percent of the Black community’s agricultural resources between 1910 and the late 1990s. This legacy of oppression means Black folks today do not control who sells food in their communities, the type of products that are sold, the quality of the crops for sale, or the terms of local food pantry contracts. Lack of control and access to nutritious food are at the root of the health disparities facing the Black community.

Dr. Brown III makes this connection through his work at Pleasant Hope Baptist Church in Baltimore, Maryland. When called upon to do hospital visits for pastoral care, he realized that many of the individuals he visited were facing diet-related health challenges. These challenges were exacerbated by the climate crisis and the effects of industrial pollution and soil corrosion in Black communities in the United States. Not surprisingly, African Americans are among those most impacted by the climate crisis. Practices like gerrymandering and white flight have pushed Blacks into highly contaminated, less resilient areas that put their lives at greater risk. Longstanding practices and policies remove nature's protective layer from Black communities, compounding the effects of natural and health disasters. The reality is that Black people are forced to survive in such conditions under the pretense that they are disposable and less than human. In James 2, the writer challenges believers of The Way to satisfy the physical needs of the hungry in addition to their spiritual needs. The Black community is hungry for food that does not attack the body. Black Christians must in good faith respond by pooling their resources to establish a Black-controlled food system by any means necessary.

A model that has had incredible responses on a national scale as it relates to this issue is the Black Church Food Security Network (BCFSN). This Black-run organization focuses on connecting Black churches with Black farmers to build a new Black food system. By creating direct access to centrally located markets, Black farmers and churches are developing a food system that directly benefits the community. Farmers gain access to consistent markets and congregations form a deeper connection with those who are growing their food. Consumers also gain the benefit of knowing the food was prepared with their health in mind and not solely for economic benefit. BCFSN goes further by working with churches to transform their plots of land into community gardens and farms. This effort expands into the development of farmers markets that connect farmers, church communities, and other Black producers in a mutually beneficial ecosystem of support and exchange.

The development of a Black food system rooted in the Black church undergirds a stewardship component that must not be overlooked.

The belief that God was a gardener who challenged people made in His image to care for the earth is at the foundation of the work of the BCFSN (Genesis 1). The development of a Black food system rooted in the Black church undergirds a stewardship component that must not be overlooked. Caring for God's creation is holy work that encourages the practice of being in harmony with nature. The soil as a starting point for the production of life becomes a key component of salvation. When the Black church cares

for creation as God intended, provides for itself outside of oppressive structures, and combats the climate crisis through sustainable agricultural systems and techniques, the nutrition of one's neighbor becomes just as important as the narrative of salvation. The Black church holds the foundational keys to the development of Black

life beyond these intersecting crises and oppressive food systems.

Alexander Clemetson is an Afro-eco-theologian focusing on the intersections of race, environment, theology, society, economy, food access, sexuality, and a great deal more. Within this framework, he organizes locally and nationally around environmental justice, Black food sovereignty, and community education.

The Ecological Roots of the Passover Haḏḡadah

Rabbi Ellen Bernstein

The basic theme of Passover is freedom—the liberation of the Jewish people. The primary image of the central Jewish holiday is a band of ragtag Israelites fleeing Pharaoh, crossing through a miraculously dividing Red Sea to make their way to freedom. At the seder table, we explore the meaning of liberation and slavery.

Passover is considered the beginning of Jewish peoplehood, and it is generally assumed that Passover is a human-centered holiday, not an earth-centered one.

I was never particularly comfortable with the central image of Passover that was repeated every year at our seder table, the story of a triumphal God leading the Israelites out of Egypt. My favorite part of the Seder was the simple green vegetable (*karpas*) that we ate early on in the ritual—a reminder of spring and the renewal of nature. I always wondered if there was an ecological story behind the human one that may have been hidden from me.

The story of Passover is a highly condensed version of the central story of the Hebrew Bible, so if there were an ecological side to Passover, I would need a much deeper understanding of the Bible itself.

In the early days of the Jewish environmental movement, many of us scoured the Bible and other Jewish texts, identifying particular verses or ideas as ecological. But I always intuited there must be something more. I hoped to find an ecological through line that connects all the disparate nuggets of the Bible's ecological wisdom.

That the ancient Israelites spent forty years (and most of the Bible) trekking across a desert wilderness, living in tents, encountering God on mountaintops, spoke to me of a way of life that was inextricably bound to the natural world and the land. Repeated stories of landedness and landlessness, and the promise of a land in which we could live freely, illuminated the centrality of land in Torah.

In the field of ecology, land is a fundamental concept, and the idea of a land ethic is foundational for environmental ethics. The land is a living organism, a community of which we are a part; the land or earth is our habitat and we are its inhabitants.

The word *eret*, which can mean both land and earth, occurs over two thousand times in the Hebrew Bible. In Torah, we had a sacred agreement with God and the land/earth. The land would never be ours to own. We would only inherit the land as temporary residents if we honored our covenant with God by living good, wholesome and righteous lives (Leviticus 25:23). If we behaved unethically or irresponsibly toward each other, the land, or God, our negativity would generate an energetic pollution that would contaminate the land. The land was that sensitive. The land

could dry up, swallow us up or vomit us out; the land was not guaranteed. The Torah's idea of the interdependence of people, land, and God mirrors nature's cycles and feedback loops.

For most people, the ecological concept of land has remained hidden. It can

be hard for some to imagine that something so lowly, so inconspicuous and ordinary as land or soil, could have much value. Many people associate land and soil with dirt—something to rid ourselves of—never recognizing it as the ground of our being.

The Torah's idea of the interdependence of people, land, and God mirrors nature's cycles and feedback loops.

In contemporary times, *eretz* often brings to mind the modern day state of Israel. Those who read the Torah literally view the physical land of Israel as God's unconditional gift to the Jews alone—the legacy of the Jewish people. Today the concept of the land of Israel has become so politically and religiously fraught that people rarely consider the ecological meaning of the word “land.”

When people understand land as territory to be fought over and acquired and owned, or as a commodity to be bought and sold, their view of land invariably becomes economic or political. This anthropocentric and political perspective mars the deeper ecological and spiritual meaning of land.

Given the hiddenness of land in Torah—or rather our inability to see it—and the many layers and intricacies of the traditional *haggadah* (the guide book to a Passover seder), it took me many years to realize that the central passage of the entire haggadah which begins with the biblical phrase, “My father was a wandering Aramean,” is also grounded in *eretz*, the land, the earth (Deuteronomy 26:5). Many modern haggadot drop this section entirely because it is shrouded in a *midrash* (a rabbinic teaching), and it can be utterly inaccessible. But even the traditional haggadot that include “My father was a wandering Aramean” do not include the whole passage. They drop the last two lines.

In the Bible, the passage boils the exodus story down into a few verses (Deuteronomy 26:5–10). The verses go something like this: “My ancestors were wanderers. They went down to Egypt. They were oppressed by the Egyptians. They cried out to God. God heard their cries and led them out of Egypt.” These are the verses that comprise the central core of a Conservative or Orthodox haggadah.

However, there are two more verses that the early rabbis cut before the passage ever made its way into the traditional haggadah. The verses continue: “And God gave us a land. And we brought back the first fruits of that land to God.”

Without these two verses, the punch line to the whole story of the Jewish people's freedom is lost. Why did God free us from Egypt in the first place? God freed us to give us a land so that we could bring the first fruits of the land back to God. The missing verses insist on a reciprocal relationship between God, the people, and the land.

In a mythical, universal reading of the Torah, our bringing the fruits—generosity, practice of right relationship—completes the cycle of God's giving to us. We return our gifts to God and to the land, and our giving back ensures the healthy productive life of the land. As long as we keep giving back, the cycle will be unbroken. The land-God-people cycle is attuned to the cycles of nature.

Freedom means having a relationship with a land—not ownership of the land—in which we could raise our own food and have agency over our own lives.

While the sages of the Jewish tradition did not explain why they deleted these two verses from the haggadah, we can infer a possibility. The very first instructions for the seder, including the two verses, were probably written a generation or two after the destruction of the Second

Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. Though many Jews scattered to other lands, there was still a sizable Jewish population in Israel. These two verses assume the Israelites were living in the land of Israel and offering the fruits of that land in the Temple in Jerusalem. By the time the haggadah was written down several centuries later, most Israelites were no longer living in that land. Perhaps the rabbis deleted these land-centered verses because they no longer reflected the reality of the Israelites, now living in exile, displaced from their place and their spiritual center. And perhaps they too were so oriented to the economic and political significance of Israel that they did not discern a deeper spiritual and ecological meaning of land.

Once I recognized the ecological dimension of land as the backbone of the Jewish origin story I was able to see the whole Passover haggadah as a reflection of our relationship to land. I could see that freedom means more than the freedom from our evil oppressors (brought to us by a triumphal God). Freedom means having a relationship with a land—not ownership of the land—in which we could raise our own food and have agency over our own lives. Freedom means living according to nature’s cycles of giving and receiving and giving back. Freedom means relishing the humility of the dirt and sharing that gift with our neighbors, human and non-human, who have been robbed of their connection to land.

Our freedom and the freedom of all people depends on a land that is free from exploitation so that it can continue to flourish and produce its fruits in perpetuity.



Ellen Bernstein founded the first national Jewish environmental organization Shomrei Adamah, Keepers of the Earth in 1988, and she writes and teaches on Judaism, Bible, and ecology. To learn more visit thepromiseoftheland.com and ellenbernstein.org.

The Stories We Inherit

A Sermon from the Christian Tradition

Reverend Nurya Parish

Set aside, for this moment, everything you know about Christian history and practice. And just re-hear one story:

At the beginning of all life
when the Holy One was fashioning the world

after the rich soil of earth had been made
the Creator of all that is

held that soil

held it with awe for the life it would serve
and with care shaped a human form.

At the beginning of all life, Christ
(the One who was and is and is to come)

breathed Holy Spirit life
into one soil-shaped very human being

a human humble humus being.

From that moment, that spark of beginning
you are.

This may not sound familiar, but it is the Christian story of Creation, the story of Genesis and St. John. The story says that the God who would take flesh in Christ breathed life into the dust of the earth, bringing to life the first human being (Genesis 2:4b–8 and John 1:1–4).

It's too bad we have to forget so much of Christian history and practice to hear that story. The story has so much to teach us. It was there the whole time, and yet somehow our ancestors did not attend to its lessons:

That what we do to the soil, we do to ourselves
That we all come from the land
That within each and every human breathes the breath of God.

The ancestors who did not attend to its lessons are mine. I am an Anglo priest in the Episcopal Church, which means I am the spiritual descendant of settler colonialists. My ancestors in faith accepted as valid a set of ideas, born from an unholy alliance between the church and imperial power, that would come to be called the Doctrine of Discovery. In that alliance, the church grievously misunderstood the authority of Christ, who clearly said, “my kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). The mistaken alliance of church and empire laid a foundation for violence against land and people in the name of God—which led inexorably to colonialism and chattel slavery.

In repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery in 2009, my church said, “Although many of us knew there were some problems of injustice, violence, and greed associated with the settlement of the Americas, not many grasp the nature and extent of that injustice and violence, carried out in the name of Jesus Christ *as the will of God.*”¹

Repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery is not enough. We must repent of it, and begin again.

At the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, after his baptism, he was driven into the wilderness and tempted by the devil. The devil offered all the wealth of all the kingdoms of this world, saying, “If you . . . will worship me, it will all be yours.” To this offer, Jesus said no (Luke 4:5–8).

Why did our ancestors in faith not read and follow the Scriptures we share? Why did they not heed the wisdom of Genesis 2 and John 1, the wisdom that says we all come from the same holy earth, receiving the same sacred breath?

Why did they not heed the wisdom of Luke 4, and remain content with humble life instead of seeking the wealth of others' kingdoms?

I can ask these questions, but they lead me nowhere.

A better question is this one: what might I do? what might we do, here and now?

As I repent and begin again, I am comforted with the assurance of Christ's forgiveness and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to be a blessing for the world. I am encouraged by the hope of salvation. Salvation is not other-worldly. It means the healing of Creation: the places where we live, and the broken relationships we inherit, here and now. I am called in Christ to serve this great work, which is the work of God. It is literally the work of remembering: remembering the wisdom of our sacred stories, and practicing faith day by day.

And that work means stepping off the path of church as usual. When God called Plainsong Farm into being, and when I responded to that call by saying "yes," I began an uphill road with no clear path, to begin a new ministry that would reflect the teachings of Genesis 2 and John 1. Somehow we were going to be Christians in relationship with God and soil and neighbor in a new way. Somehow we were going to grow food in a way that provided healing to land and people. Somehow this was going to be church, but it would be church in a way nobody could quite visualize. We didn't know how it was going to look when it was done. (It's still very much not done.) But we had to begin. The stories we inherit ask that of us. They ask us to imagine and incarnate a way of being Christian that repents of the damage done by our ancestors. They ask us to imagine and incarnate a way of being Christian that honors the teachings of Jesus Christ more fully. This is the work I have chosen every day. I fail at it every day. And every day I begin again.

The poet Adrienne Rich writes,

**My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world. ²**

The Bible teaches us that we are made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1). Perhaps the way this is most true is that we too are creators. The choices of our ancestors shape our world, but our choices shape the world for our descendants. May we remember that we are called to begin again. May we perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.

In the name of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit,

Amen.

The Reverend Nurya Love Parish is a priest in the Episcopal Church and cofounder of Plainsong Farm, a new farm and ministry in western Michigan. She was a convenor of the original interfaith FaithLands gathering in 2018 and is cofounder of ChurchLands, an ecumenical Christian initiative to connect and equip churches seeking to use land for good.

Chesed + Emet = Teshuva: A Practice for the Heart and the World, On Chochenyo Ohlone Land

Rabbi Dev Naily

In our tradition words are holy. And not just words, but letters—their shapes and characteristics. The word *emet*, אמת, truth, is made up of the first letter of the alef-bet, the middle letter, and the final letter: *alef–mem–tav*. Emet encompasses, and is a symbol of, the entire alef-bet, the power of language, and the whole of what is. We are given the gift of language in order to seek truth, name truth, and teach truth, from person to person, generation to generation.

In contrast we can look at *sheker*, שקר, the word for falsehood, lie, betrayal of trust. The letters that make up *sheker—shin, koof, resh*—are bunched together near the end of the alef-bet. They're also scrambled; they need to be taken out of the alef-bet and mixed up in order to form the word for lie. There is no lie embedded in the alef-bet.

And what about how these two words look? Each letter in *emet* is solid, stable, and can stand on its own. The word itself is strong, stable, and a trustworthy foundation.

Sheker, on the other hand, is made of letters that have no foundation. Each of them is unbalanced and easily toppled. Nothing can be built on the foundation of the word *sheker*.

In *emet* we can see two other words: *Em*, alef–mem, which means mother, and *met*, mem–tav, which means death. Each of us comes from a mother; each of us will die. The span of our lives, this mysterious gift we are given, from the moment we have a parent until the moment we die, is contained in this word—*emet*, truth.

Facing death is a big part of Yom Kippur. We imitate death by not eating, drinking, bathing, or lovemaking. We wear white; some of us wear a *kittel*, the garment Jews traditionally are dressed in when our bodies are prepared for burial. We do this because death is true, and real, and most of the time, we hide that truth in the recesses of our mind, unless we or someone close to us is at the boundary between life and death.

Facing death is how we touch the exquisite treasure that this life is. It's how we touch the depth of our love for those closest to us, letting that love swell so that the little annoyances that too often fill our attention can be diluted into proper measure.

Facing the truth is how we remember who we really are and what is at stake, and how we illuminate the path to choosing life. But facing the truth is no easy thing.

אמת וחסד So in our tradition, *emet* has a faithful companion. The first time the word *emet* appears in the Torah, in 1 Genesis 24:27, it's paired with *chesed*, loving-kindness. That pairing returns again and again. Many times during the High Holy days we chant the Thirteen Attributes of G-d, including the words “*Rav chesed v’emet*.”

G-d is filled with *chesed* and *emet*, together.

Chesed, loving-kindness, without *emet*, truth, can lead us to delusion, to distorting the truth to see only what we think will be beautiful. And *emet* without *chesed*, truth without loving-kindness, can lead to harsh judgment and destructive rage, which in turn can lead us to avoid the truth altogether because its cost can feel so dear.

Rabbi Jordan Bendat Appel translates³ *emet* as “honest-looking.” Honest-looking, he says, requires the courage to look at what is present, even when it's messy, confusing or painful. And *chesed*, loving-kindness, requires that we meet what is true with warmth and acceptance.

This partnership of chesed and emet is the foundational practice of *teshuvah*: turning to face the truth with love and compassion, ready to walk the path of accountability and repair.

Teshuva for This Place: Living on Ohlone Land

The practice of chesed and emet can guide us as we reflect on harm, and healing, in the world. I want to bring this practice to our relationship to the land on which we live.

My attention has been drawn to the need for teshuvah on this beautiful Ohlone land. I don't know yet where this process will lead. I don't fully understand yet why the call is so powerful for me. But I can't turn away from it. The stakes feel very high. Understanding the truth of what happened here, meeting that truth with compassion, and doing teshuvah, have become priorities for me. As I engage in this process I feel myself softening, opening, and being drawn in more deeply. I invite you to explore it with me.

I've lived almost all my life in California, and though I learned "California history" in school, I was never taught about the lives of Indigenous people and what really happened here. When I ask kids about what they are learning now, I hear it hasn't changed much. The California Indian History Curriculum Coalition is fighting to bring this history into the state's public schools. Rose Borunda, a coordinator of the coalition, recently said, "Our story has never been present. It's often sidestepped because it's inconvenient. But it's the truth, and students should learn it."⁴

We should know the truth of the dozens of distinct, thriving Indigenous communities—including the Ohlone—who lived here from time immemorial. We should know how those communities were decimated by waves of conquest and how the survivors have kept their cultures and stories alive while struggling to heal from past and ongoing trauma, violence, and disruption.

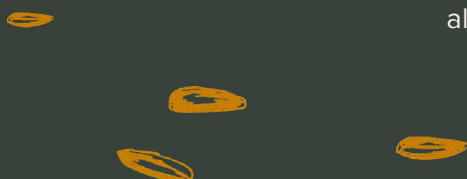
The first academic book to fully document the genocide of Indigenous people in what is now known as California was not published until 2016. *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe*, written by Benjamin Madley, confirms that between 1846 and 1873 at least 80 percent of Indigenous peoples there were exterminated by colonialist settlers. "State and federal policies, in combination with vigilante violence, played major roles" in their near-annihilation, Madley writes.⁵ Genocide here was state-sanctioned, it was legal, and it was lied about for decades.

That's some of the emet of where we live. My life—our lives—here are built on sheker, on an unstable foundation that can't support us.

Along with the difficult, painful truth, there is also abundant chesed. Corrina Gould, a cofounder of the Sogorea Te' Land Trust, said, "We can create a healing for the people that are here. Not just the Ohlone people, but all people that exist on this land."⁶

That is chesed.

With Corrina's vision, I can begin to see the seeds not only for the healing of the Ohlone history of genocide, but also for the healing of our Jewish history of genocide, and also for the healing of our mother, the earth. Because the only way for us to heal is if we all heal together.



Our Traveling Jewish Homeland and Our Home Where We Live

It strikes me that 2020 was the Jewish year 5779. In Jewish mythic time we count five thousand seven hundred and seventy-nine years since the creation of the world. The whole span of Jewish time is about the same as the five thousand years that the Ohlone and other Indigenous peoples are known to have lived in the Bay Area.

As I look at my family history, I can't count more than two generations born in the same place. But before white

people came, Indigenous people had already lived here for hundreds of generations, passing on teachings and practices particular to this place, to its trees, rocks, waters, and creatures. Slim pathways through the land were tread by so many thousands of footsteps that in some places they sunk to a foot below ground level.

I try to imagine what it might be like to walk on a narrow path in the footsteps of my ancestors. For me, the path of my ancestors is portable. It is text and melody and prayer and Hebrew letters. As Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, it is a path of holy time, of sanctification of time, not of place.⁷

In *A Traveling Homeland, The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora*, Daniel Boyarin teaches that Jews carry our homeland with us in diaspora in the form of textual, interpretive communities built around Talmud study.⁸ He teaches that the later editors of the Talmud constructed this traveling homeland intentionally, in a radical move of liberation from a single, fixed, and favored land.

People like Heschel and Boyarin have taught us that we can be fully Jewish anywhere in the world where we can build a community, and that Judaism can thrive in diaspora. Diaspora is a primary, not a secondary, location for Jewish life.

But while my spirit is fed by the cycles of sacred time and the transgenerational community that lives in the portable homeland of holy text, my body still lives in a place, a specific location on the earth. As a human being, I need to be connected, physically and spiritually, to the place where I am.

As a Jewish community we are weaving together the emet of white people's genocide of Indigenous peoples, and our accountability for its legacy, with the chesed of the Ohlone invitation to create a healing for all the people that exist on this land.

As we follow Indigenous leadership and learn about the sacred sites and stories of this land, we are also starting to see new possibilities for our healing and for our place-specific, diaspora Jewish identity.

As one of the great Jewish teachers of the last century, Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, writes:⁹

Teshuvah comes from the depths—from a great depth in regard to which the individual human spirit is not a self-contained entity but a continuum of the great, universal being. As the Talmud teaches, “Great is Teshuvah, which brings healing to the world. And when one person does teshuvah, they and the entire world are forgiven.”

Dev Noily serves as senior rabbi of Kehilla Community Synagogue in Huichin, Chochenyo Ohlone territory (also known as Oakland, California). They are a cofounder of Jews on Ohlone Land, organizing Jews to live in right relationship with Ohlone people and land, in solidarity with the Indigenous-led Sogorea Te' Land Trust.

Establishing Ethical Economies on Land as an Act of Faith: Rediscovering Our Purpose

Rhamis
Kent



There is no Muslim who plants a tree or sows a field, and a human, bird, or animal eats from it, but it shall be reckoned as charity from him.

—The Prophet Muhammad (May God’s peace and blessings be upon him and his family)

The organization of livelihood—that is how Malaysian Islamic scholar Dr. Adi Setia defines economics. This translates not as the science of profits and losses, but as the science of earning and provisioning for the common good at the level of the individual and family, or at the level of community and society.

In *Right Livelihood & The Common Good: Kasb Tayyib wa Maslahah ‘Ammah*, Dr. Setia (with Nicholas Mahdi Lock) shows that the Islamic intellectual tradition has classically seen economics as being intimately tied to *tadbīr al-manzīl*, household caretaking or stewardship.¹⁰ The primary responsibility of the householder is to ensure that the resources of the household, tangible and intangible, are managed prudently so that the material and spiritual needs of all members of the household are met and taken care of in such a way that none is marginalized, especially weaker and more dependent members such as babies, young children, the handicapped, the ill, the elderly, and even animals and plants of the household.

In the classical Islamic system of philosophy, *tadbīr al-manzīl* comes under the division of *al-hikmat al-‘amaliyyah*, or practical philosophy, which in addition to economics (management of the household) includes ethics (management of the self) and politics (management of society).

This practical philosophy is extended to the entire creation in the recognition that everything in existence has a right and reality gifted by God that must be properly recognized and honored. Failing to do so would constitute oppression (*ẓulm*) and a failure to observe the proper rules of etiquette and manners (*adab*, or putting things in their proper place), in addition to evidencing deficiencies in one’s ethical human comportment (*akhlaq*).

Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, eleventh century author of the highly influential multi-volume serial text, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*), deftly summarizes this conceptual understanding:¹¹

Verily, the Lord of lords and the Causer of causes has made the Afterlife the abode of the reimbursement (*al-thawāb*) and chastisement (*al-‘iqāb*), and the world (*al-dunyā*) the abode of intrigue, tumult and endeavour. The endeavour in the world is not restricted to the Return to the Afterlife (*al-ma’ād*) at the expense of livelihood (*al-ma’āsh*). But rather, the livelihood [in this world] is an expedient to the Return to the Afterlife, and an aid towards it, for the world is the seedbed of the Hereafter (*al-dunyā mazra’at al-ākhirat*) and a route towards it.

Our fate in the Afterlife is ultimately determined by the degree to which we embody divine attributes in this world as learned through the examples provided by the prophets, the saints, and the righteous. The fashion in which our livelihoods are pursued must reflect the qualities of wisdom, justice, forbearance, beneficence, and graciousness as a lived reality. Our spiritual traditions are not merely confined to concerns about our personal religious practice. The ritual religious observances should be preparing us to operate as morally upright (not to be mistaken for self-righteous), ethically sound, and decent people in our worldly dealings.

At the very least, a belief in Divine reckoning drives us to be mindful of our behavior in all facets of life since it has long-term consequences. At most, striving to be our ethical best makes the Divine real in our daily lives by informing what appear to be mundane actions that are also endowed with profound metaphysical impacts. In the aggregate, the spaces we occupy are reflective of either how beautiful or how ugly we collectively demonstrate ourselves to be—which may also, in part, be an indication of how beautiful or ugly our Afterlife might be.

The American farmer-poet Wendell Berry has written about a Faustian economics founded upon a destructive, sociopathic industrialism that denies the ties between the temporal life of human beings on earth, their inborn spiritual identities, and their ultimate destiny. The ardent faith shown in the non-negotiable nature of this industrial-consumer system resembles what is often observed in fanatical religious adherents. By extension, it could be said that this “religion” of consumption was spread—and is forcibly maintained—by a type of terroristic violence typically ascribed to other faith traditions.

This largely goes unnoticed or is conveniently overlooked by those saved from having to bear the brunt of its worst impacts while also enjoying the benefits accompanying its maintenance and promulgation. Those most suffering the deleterious effects—such as farmworkers in the United States, cacao farmers in Africa, the Indigenous stewards of the Amazon, and the marine ecosystems between them—are often also excluded from the benefits. The acceptance of such a system speaks to a moral and ethical bankruptcy symptomatic of an evangelical Mammonism plaguing far too many people of faith.

In order to live with dignity, human communities must have access to the sources of the products and services essential to meeting their basic needs. They must have the ability to produce food, provision for clean water and air, and access building materials and land to build on. Oppression and tyranny invariably result from people being denied the ability to provide for their own needs in a manner they determine is most beneficial and appropriate.

In order to live with dignity, human communities must have access to the sources of the products and services essential to meeting their basic needs.

One of the critical foundations facilitating the adequate fulfilment of communal and civilizational needs is being afforded access to productive and ecologically functional land. It forms the very basis of right livelihood and the common good. This topic was directly addressed in *The Book of Earning a Livelihood* (*Kitāb al-Kasb*), written by Imām Muhammad Ibn Al-Hasan Al-Shāybanī in the eighth century. He answers the question, Is commerce superior, or farming?, very clearly:¹²

Most of our scholars, may [God] Most High have mercy on them all, are of the view that farming is superior to commerce because it is of wider benefit (*a’ammu naf’an*).

For through the vocation of farming is produced that by which a person fortifies his backbone (i.e. – gives strength to the body) and derives strength to render obedience (to Allah). The Prophet (ﷺ) said, ‘The best of people is he who is most beneficial to people,’ hence to be occupied with what is more generally beneficial is superior.

(Farming is also better) because charitable giving (*al-ṣadāqah*) in farming is also more manifest, for the people, animals (*al-dawābb*) and birds (*al-ṭuyūr*) inevitably partake of what is earned by the farmer, and all that is (counted as) charity for him. The Prophet (ﷺ), may God bless him and give him peace, says "Never does a Muslim plant (*gharasa*) a tree (*shajarah*), and a person or animal or bird partakes of it, except that it becomes for him a charity."

True spiritual excellence (*ihsan*) is realized by the manner in which the human being deals with the creation—most notably, through the husbandry of land (*tahsin al-ard*) and the revival of dead land (*ihya al-mawat*). In the words of the American Islamic scholar Abdur-Rahman Othman Llewellyn, fructifying the earth is a profoundly ethical act.



Rhamis Kent serves as a supervisory board member of the Ecosystem Restoration Camps Foundation, advocating for global collective action to rehabilitate damaged ecosystems, and as a trustee and implementation team member at Plant for Peace Foundation, an initiative to assist rural communities and smallholder farmers in conflict and post-conflict territories around the world. He teaches courses integrating permaculture design and the Islamic gift economy.

Egypt, the Promised Land, and Charity: An Old Testament Approach to Land Usage and Helping the Poor

Reverend
Jarrod
Davis



There is dignity and blessing in work. Many of our modern models of charity rob recipients of that dignity and blessing.

In a typical charitable model, one group possesses needed goods and distributes them to those in need. This creates and reinforces a benefactor relationship, wherein the recipient is beholden to a benevolent overlord. It may be done with the best of intentions, but it takes people right back to the relationship of power and domination that the Israelites faced in Egypt, which God led them out of.

Upon entering the Promised Land, God laid out rules for a new way of living and a new economic system that was radically different from the system the Israelites left behind. At the heart of this new economy was land access. By returning to the practices put forth in Leviticus, churches and other faith communities can help those in need in a way that emphasizes independence, dignity, work, and fairness.

A New Lifestyle, A New Economy

While in Egypt, the people of Israel were slaves, subject to the whims and desires of their taskmasters. As enslaved people they labored endlessly at impossible tasks, such as making bricks with no straw, while wholly dependent on the taskmasters for their food, clothing, and shelter. It was a relationship of power and domination.

Contrast that with the covenant that God laid out for the people upon entering the Promised Land. Instead of using their power to hold dominion over others, the people of Israel were to care for others, from their closest kin to widows, orphans, and foreign migrants in their midst. It was to be a relationship of brotherliness and compassion.

Upon entering the Promised Land, the land was divided all tribes and families. Each family received their fair share of land. Why? Possession of and access to land has always been the bedrock of economic independence and sustainability. Possession of and access to land leads to food, housing, and job security. As possessors of the land, the Israelites would not be beholden to taskmasters any longer.

However, God wanted them to understand that the land is a gift that can be taken away. The people of Israel possessed the land, but the land itself would remain the Lord's. In other words, the Israelites were stewards of the Promised Land. Stewards are not permitted to do as they please with what is entrusted into their care. Instead, there are expectations for how what is entrusted is to be used. In the case of the Promised Land, there are guidelines and restrictions for how the land itself is to be used. These guidelines and restrictions mean the land is used for helping others, not dominating them.

Three Guidelines for Land Usage

Leviticus 25:28b describes a situation wherein an indebted person must sell their property. It is the responsibility of that person's kinsman to purchase the property, if they are able, and thus not dispossess the individual from their home

and security. If no relative is able to purchase the property, it may be sold outside of the family. However, "What was sold shall remain with the purchaser until the year of jubilee; in the jubilee it shall be released, and the property shall be returned," God says. In other words, possession of and access to land shall not be denied indefinitely. It is important to God that security and independence be an ongoing reality for God's people, from generation to generation.

Similarly, God gave the Israelites instructions for dealing fairly with laborers and consumers that are land-centric. In Leviticus 19:15, God instructs those who are selling their crops not to use false measurements or deceit to increase their profit. God also instructs employers not to withhold wages from their laborers. The economic system the Lord envisions is one of fairness, showing no partiality to the poor nor deference to the great.

Most interesting to me is God's instructions for helping the poor. In Leviticus 19:9–10, God tells the Israelites,

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the lord your God.

Here is a model for charity that values the dignity of the recipient over the positive feeling of the provider. God could have easily said, "Set aside ten percent of your harvest, and give it to the poor." Instead, farmers were expected to leave behind portions of their crops in the fields so that those in need could come and help themselves. This restores the dignity of work and self-reliance to the poor. Allowing the poor to help themselves to the gleanings also gives the opportunity to sell those gleanings and work toward a better life.

These three simple mandates establish an economic system wherein all have the independence and ability to become and remain food, housing, and job secure. Fields open to gleaning by the poor give opportunities, not hand-outs. The requirement of fair wages and fair prices guarantees that the poorest will not be taken advantage of. Returning land sold for indebtedness at the year of jubilee means that none will be born into an enslaved lifestyle.

A Modern Egypt

Unfortunately, the economic reality in the world today far more closely resembles Egypt than the Promised Land.

The grinding gears of the economy seem so vast as to be inevitable and unchangeable. Even acts of charity with the best intentions far too often reinforce this slavery-like dynamic.

What can we do against such an overwhelming system?

Churches and other faith communities in North America are in possession of one of the most powerful and underutilized aspects of economic change: land. The number of acres owned by faith groups is staggering, and most of it is uncultivated. What is cultivated usually grows inedible grasses, flowers, and shrubbery.

Scripture is clear: the earth is the Lord's, and we are stewards. We need to be more mindful and intentional about how we steward what God owns. What if we decided to take seriously the land-use guidelines of Leviticus?

What if we used the land to help those in need by providing opportunities to work, opportunities for fair wages and fair prices, and opportunities to break the generational cycles of poverty and enslavement? Wouldn't that be the kind of stewardship that would make God smile?

There is only one way to find out.

NOTE:

All Bible quotes are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.



Jarrold Davis has been a United Methodist pastor in North Carolina since 2012, where he advocates for food and environmental justice in rural areas. He can be found on Facebook or his blog, Creator, Creature, Collards.

The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home. Here I want to recognize, encourage and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the protection of the home which we share. Particular appreciation is owed to those who tirelessly seek to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world's poorest. Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded.

Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home.

I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.



—Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, No. 13 and No. 14

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B.

WHAT'S YOUR VISION FOR THIS LAND?

BROAD GOALS & PRINCIPLES

I really feel connecting with the land is healing for everybody. It's not just, oh we're Native people, we're close to the land, we have this spiritual connection: everybody has a spiritual connection, but it's been lost.

—Johnella LaRose,
cofounder/director of
Sogorea Te' Land Trust

Sacred areas are probably the oldest form of habitat protection on the planet.

—Nigel Dudley, Liza Higgins-Zogib, and
Stephanie Mansourian,
*Beyond Belief: Linking
faiths and protected areas
to support biodiversity*

The FaithLands Toolkit outlines numerous paths that your faith community may take in relationship to land. Determining your role is an important step.

1.

You own the land and are responsible for farming activity on it. Your staff would farm it or manage a community garden. Your staff might provide farm-related educational or community activities.

3.

You could own land and partner with a land trust to protect the land for farming and/or to make the land available for other traditional land-based practices, such as tribal ceremony.

5.

You could own land and rent it to an independent farmer. You would be the landlord.

2.

You could lease land from others and farm it, as in #1.

4.

You could donate land to a land trust or nonprofit organization to run farming, stewardship, and/or land-based educational activities.

6.

You could own land and lease or contract with an organization to run farming activities.

7.

You could sell land and donate proceeds to a farming or land-based organization.



Your role will be determined by a variety of factors, including the character of the land, your legal relationship to the land, the values and capacity of your faith community, and your overarching purpose with regard to farming and land.

Reflecting on these questions will help you articulate your goals and determine what role your faith community can play. Keep them in mind and revisit your initial answers as you read through the toolkit and learn more about the many possible approaches to build and support healthy relations and equitable access to land. You can also use some of these questions to draw members of your faith community into the conversation.

What is your **vision for this land**? What have you been called to do?

What is your **relationship to the land**? What do you want your role(s) in the farming operation to be?

If you don't own land, or don't know the extent of land owned, **what draws you to connect to the land**? How could connecting with land strengthen your community?

What purpose or mission will drive agricultural use of the land?

To educate youth? To bring your community into conversation and harmony with the land they live on?

To create opportunities for new farmers, women, people of color, and urban farmers, and support growth of resilient local food systems?

To create opportunities for Black farmers as an act of reparations?

To return land to Indigenous peoples seeking to practice land-based lifestyles and spiritual traditions?

To protect land from development or from destructive agricultural practices?

To grow, or contract another organization to grow, fresh, healthy food for homeless shelters and food pantries?

Is your purpose and vision shared throughout your faith community? If the answer is "not yet," how can you inspire others to get on board?

If the land is adjacent to your place of worship, how can farm operations and ceremony **coexist in harmony**?

What do you want in terms of **land management**? What do you care about?

Do you want any **particular type of farmer(s)** on your staff or as tenant(s)?

What restrictions do you have regarding the land and its use(s)?

What are you willing and/or able to contribute to the success of the farm operation?

What is **your group's capacity** to meet your goals? Do you have the necessary organizational resources and expertise to manage an operation or be a conscientious landlord?

What are your **financial considerations**?

What **time frame** are you considering?

What would **success** look like?

Your answer to many of these questions might initially be, “I don’t know!” Ultimately, you may want to draft a mission statement. This might be three core principles that will guide your actions, or a more detailed declaration, like the Sisters of St. Joseph’s Land Ethic Statement.

If you want to create opportunities for new farmers and support growth of resilient local food systems, but you don’t have the resources to start a production farm, **consider leasing land to a local farmer.**

If your land is located on the unceded ancestral lands of a Native tribe who continues to live in the area or whose members seek to reconnect with their ancestral lands and traditions, **consider donating land to the tribe** or **partnering with a land trust** to protect tribal access to the land with a cultural respect easement.

If your faith community has deep connections to the land, **consider partnering with a land trust** to protect the land from development.

If your faith community wants to reconnect to the land and provide the surrounding area with sustainably raised fruits and vegetables, **consider starting a farm or community garden.**

These are just a few possible scenarios. **Learning more about farmers and farming** and **how to evaluate the suitability of land for farming** are good places to start. Identifying prospective partners and needs in your area is another essential step.

In 2015, the Sisters of St. Joseph formalized their commitment to earth and neighbor by affirming a Land Ethic Statement. The statement outlines key principles and specific commitments, and has helped the Sisters to make clear, informed, and ethical decisions that consider the present and future integrity of the land they hold in sacred trust at their Brentwood, New York, campus.

With this statement, they committed to nine points, including:

To treat all parts of Earth as sacred and Earth’s beings as our neighbors to be respected and loved;

To affirm that every member of the Earth community has intrinsic value in its being, and the right to live in its natural habitat, and to fulfill its role in the ever-renewing processes of Earth;

To keep in mind the needs of the persons in all of our local neighborhoods;

To preserve, protect, restore, and cherish the integrity, biodiversity, balance, and beauty of the land and all the species with whom we share it;

To research options such as land trusts, easements, deed restrictions, and the transfer or selling of development rights in order to determine the best way to preserve the land that we hold in sacred trust.

Since articulating their land ethic, the Sisters have installed a solar array, evaluated their soils and opportunities for conservation, and partnered with local land trusts to protect 27 acres of working farmland, 43 acres woodlands, and 35 acres of pollinator habitat from development. Not least, they started leasing land to farmers, increasing the availability of healthy, farm-fresh produce in Long Island’s most densely populated county. Learn more about the Sisters’ work [here](#).



Photo by Sijie Yuan.

A FARMER'S PERSPECTIVE: LIBERATION FARMS

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN
2014

WHERE
Lewiston and Wales, Maine

WHAT

Liberation Farms, a program of the Bantu-led Somali Bantu Community Association that integrates community gardening, cooperative growing, and production farming

MISSION/PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES

To provide new American farmers access to, and culturally appropriate resources for, the means of sustainable food production for themselves, their families, and their communities; to support community building and cultural preservation for the Somali Bantu who now make their home in Maine; to center and uplift Bantu voices when providing services for, or making decisions about, the Bantu community

For the last thirty years we have been refugees, moving through different towns in Somali and living in refugee camps in neighboring Kenya. For thirty years we have been looking for a place we can call home. Home in our community means a place that is safe and secure, where we can farm freely and where we can exercise our cultural traditions.

Our vision for the land is grounded in our successes to date and by the demonstrated needs within our community. In the first three years following the land acquisition [in Wales], Liberation Farms could expand from thirty acres of corn and vegetables to fifty acres and from two acres of goat pasture to more than ten acres. The land can support the expansion of our most culturally significant crop, flint corn. We carried flint corn seeds with us to the United States because we know this staple crop is what has sustained us for generations—eaten fresh after the harvest, and dried and ground through the winter. The growing season in Maine is short, but we have our corn all year round. The land [in Wales] includes several buildings that can be used to dry, store, and process flint corn; house our goats for a community halal meat source; and enable a much needed expansion for

We carried flint corn seeds with us to the United States because we know this staple crop is what has sustained us for generations...

SBCA's other programming, especially our Kasheekee youth program. The location is ideally suited for a farmstand and is only twenty minutes from the center of Lewiston, where many community members live, so it is very accessible. For all these reasons and more, this is perhaps the most meaningful opportunity our community has had to support and uplift our people.

—Muhidin Libah, cofounder and executive director of the Somali Bantu Community Association



Liberation Farms began with just over 30 participating families and a two-acre parcel of leased land. From 2014 to 2020, the Somali Bantu Community Association (SBCA) expanded the program by leasing additional parcels, growing their program to support more than 180 farming families. Land access enabled more families to participate in the farming program, bolstering community food security and access to green space. However, the SBCA continued to face a challenge experienced by many small farmers who lease land: losing the very same short-term leases that enabled the program to excel. Whether the result of a landlord's decision to sell the topsoil or other reasons, the SBCA's director and staff determined that short-term leases could not support their long-term goals. Insecure land access threatened their cultural preservation, stewardship of the land, and community food and economic security. So, in 2019, they launched a search for farmland and convened service providers who could advise.

Land access enabled more families to participate in the farming program, bolstering community food security and access to green space.

In 2020, the Little Jubba Central Maine Agrarian Commons (AC), founded through a partnership between Agrarian Trust and the SBCA, acquired a 104-acre farm in nearby Wales, Maine, to fulfill the SBCA's vision. The Little Jubba AC will lease the farm to the SBCA through a 99-year equitable and affordable lease. With land secured for the long term, this farming community can plan for and invest in sustainable agriculture, including soil fertility, which requires a comprehensive plan implemented over the course of several growing seasons. Land security will ensure food security for the families who already participate in the Liberation Farms program and enable more to farm in the coming seasons.

As an organization that is run for and by the Bantu community, the Somali Bantu Community Association is uniquely able to adapt to the changing needs of its members. The United States Food Sovereignty Alliance awarded the SBCA its 2020 Food Sovereignty Prize for their work to provide food and financial security to more than 200 refugee farmers whose communities are disproportionately hit by both COVID-19 and hunger, while also serving the broader community, including provision of fresh, healthy foods to local schools.

KEY CONCEPT:

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution, and consumption based on environmental, social, and economic sustainability.¹³



C.

ABOUT FARMING & FARMERS

One day, Honi was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Honi said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Honi said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree? He replied: That man himself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.

—William Davidson Talmud,
Ta'anit 23a

*A farmer's equity
is in the land.*

—Teddy Bolkas,
Thera Farms



The more you know about farmers, farming, and your land—whether you want to develop your own farm operation, lease or donate to a farmer collective or tribe, or partner with a land trust to conserve it for farming—the better the chance for success. Not every farmer, nor farm enterprise or farming practice, is a good match for a particular parcel or landowner.

Agricultural operations are diverse, depending on several factors. The type of farm or ranch is shaped by the region and its natural features. Some grow only one or a few crops, some raise animals, and others produce a range of products. Some farms grow Christmas trees, berries, or flowers. Some properties are good for raising bees or mushrooms. Some operations “add value” by processing on the farm, making products from pre-washed salad and peeled fruits to pies, packaged meat, and wreaths. Each business is different and is run differently. Some market their products directly to consumers while others sell through wholesale channels. Farms increasingly turn to tourism, community education, pick-your-own, and other interactive activities to diversify income and capitalize on growing interest in healthy food.

Over 90 percent of farms in the United States are considered “small,” a categorization determined by the USDA based on annual sales rather than acreage. Nonetheless, the average farm size increased by 67 percent over the course of the 20th century.¹⁴ The corresponding consolidation of land has intensified competition for farmland and created a roadblock for a new generation of farmers. In 1982, most producers worked full-time on the farm,¹⁵ whereas most farms now rely on off-farm income to support a family. A farm operated by a faith group will likely have unique features and business structures.

The stereotype of an agrarian vista with a barn and silo does not capture the variety of contemporary agricultural businesses. A farm can be a quarter of an acre of high-value herbs; a livestock ranch can encompass thousands of acres with farm buildings. Some farms are operated by a single individual; others have partners, employees, seasonal laborers, and/or apprentices. Some farms require infrastructure such as barns, greenhouses, fencing, and water. Some have substantial equipment; others work mostly with human labor.

Farmers are as varied as farm operations. Each brings their vision, objectives, and style to the business of farming. Today’s surge of new farmers is heartening. Most do not come from farm backgrounds, so they do not have access to family land.

This generation includes Black and Indigenous farmers, women, immigrants and new citizens, and military veterans, who often find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing arable land.

Beginning farmers—defined by the USDA as those who have operated a farm for ten years or less—are not necessarily young; some are midlife career-changers. Some are returning to land-based lifestyles practiced by their ancestors and/or cultures of generations past. Once established, farmers may seek land to expand or relocate their operation. Group farming is increasingly popular, as is urban farming, which often relies on controlled environments such as greenhouses or buildings.

Farmers vary in their practices, too. Some practice “conventional” agriculture, employing methods such as the use of chemicals for fertility and pest management. Others obtain certification as “organic,” which limits the types of inputs. “Sustainable” farmers include a wide range of approaches and methods geared primarily toward soil health and conservation, biodiversity, water protection, and the production of healthier food. See ["Earth Care"](#) for more.

Across the US and regardless of the type of farmer or farm operation, access to land is one of farmers’ biggest challenges. This is where owners of agriculturally suitable land can play a crucial role in our local food systems.

KEY CONCEPT:

A **land-based lifestyle** is any life-style where living off, from, or with the land is a way of life. Farming and ranching are land-based lifestyles, as are traditional practices such as gathering medicinal plants, fishing, and ceremony.



In 1920, there were 926,000 Black-operated farms in the US, managing 41.4 million acres of land. In 2017, just under 49,000 farmer operators identified as Black; together, they managed 4.7 million acres, less than half a percent of US farmland.

There is a growing movement to support Black farmers, both in accessing land for new farms and in holding onto land that families have managed to pass down through generations.

In colonizing the North American continent, the US has taken some 1.5 billion acres of land from Indigenous communities.


While the US government ratified more than 350 treaties with Native American tribes, they have often been violated, and all required concessions from the signing tribe. Under duress, tribes relinquished vast tracts of land in exchange for sovereignty and/or reservation lands, sometimes located at a great distance from their ancestral homelands.

Many tribes seek to reconnect with ancestral lands and practices, to honor the land and build resilience in the face of climate change.

Every day, 2000 acres of agricultural land are paved over, fragmented, or converted to uses that jeopardize farming. In 2017, the average age of farmers was 57.5; 400 million acres of farmland are expected to exchange hands as these long-time farmers age, retire, and sell their land.

This farmland is at risk of being lost even as the need for food production and land stewardship increases.

Between 2012 and 2017, the number of primary producers under thirty-five increased by nearly 2,000—but primary producers over sixty-five now outnumber farmers under thirty-five by more than six to one.



Over 60 percent of farmworkers are people of color, but white people own 98 percent of all farmland.



D.

IS THIS SITE SUITABLE FOR FARMING?

**UNDERSTANDING
YOUR LAND,
ENGAGING YOUR
COMMUNITY**

In evaluating any piece of land's suitability for farming, there are two key considerations: the land itself and its neighboring communities. While the following guidelines focus on land already owned by your faith community, we also include tips for finding farmland to lease.

Keep in mind that this chapter focuses on understanding land for farming; if your goal is to return land to a tribe for traditional land-based practices such as fishing or ceremony, you will want to evaluate your land in partnership with the tribe.

Understanding Your Land

Understanding the land is essential to the success of your project. Is the land suited for farming? What about the neighborhood? Will the land need to heal from past uses before it can be farmed? What about state regulations? These are a few of the questions to ask early in your planning process.

Farmers seeking land for their enterprise frequently consider the following:

The natural resource base: soil type and quality, topography, climate, vegetation

Built features: buildings, wells, irrigation, fencing, electricity, road access

Affordability: Can they afford to purchase the land or does renting make more sense?

Security: For farmer-tenants, do they have a written agreement with farmer-friendly terms? Do they have adequate control and reasonable approval procedures?

Location: Is the location good for their type of marketing? Would this be the home farm, or would the farmer need to travel there from the main operation? Are needed services within reach? Are the neighborhood and surrounding community supportive?

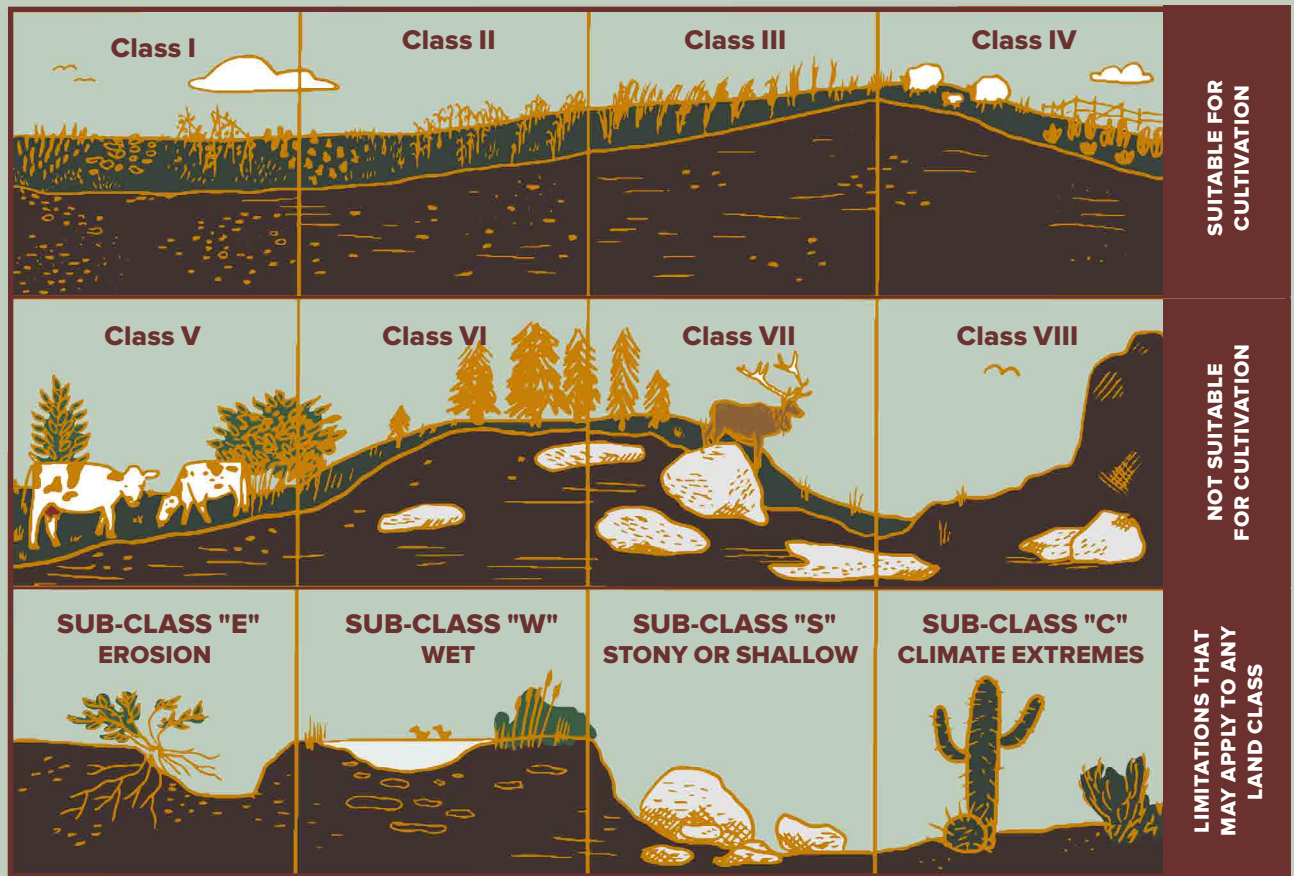
SITE SUITABILITY ASSESSMENT

It's a good idea to assess your property for its unique potential for agricultural uses based on its soil, landscape setting and characteristics, climate conditions, history, and vegetation. Some properties are versatile; some can be adapted for farming; others are not suited for any type of farming activity. The location and physical properties of the parcel will influence the type(s) of farmer and farm operation. Keep in mind that the land's prior uses may not necessarily be its only—or best.

Conduct an analysis of the site's suitability for agriculture. Assuming that farming is permitted in that location, the next step is to learn about the soils. Determining soil types from a Geographic Information System (GIS) or other tool is a satisfactory start. Soil testing at the field level may be important later on.



Soils are classified in several ways. One is according to their capability for agriculture. Prime agricultural soils are the highest capability. The classification will tell you whether an area is sloped, wet, or stony. If the soil is poor, or has been poorly treated, soil health and investment in soil improvements may be a priority. Soils in urban settings will likely need to be tested for contamination. Soil maps and interpretive data are available through the [National Resources Conservation Service \(NRCS\) Web Soil Survey](#).



Other considerations include:

Vegetation cover

What is there now? Will any land need to be cleared?
Are there invasive species?

Buildings

Are there buildings on the property for equipment and/or other storage, animal shelter, or a farmer's residence?
If so, what condition are they in?

Community access

Where is the property in relation to the faith community's gathering place? Is it practical for the community to get to the property, if that's desirable or necessary? (If your group is leasing land to a farmer, community access may not be a priority.)

Compatibility with nonfarm resources & uses

Is the property important habitat for birds or endangered species? Do planned farming activities enhance or threaten that habitat? Are neighbors accustomed to using or crossing the parcel for recreation? Could scenic vistas or historic features be compromised by farm structures?

Water

Is water accessible for crops and animals? If not, can a water resource be developed and maintained? At whose expense? Are water rights an issue?

Farmer access

Is there adequate physical access to the land, like a road wide enough for farm equipment?

Safety

Are there, or could there be, issues around security on the property? Unfortunately, sometimes crops are damaged or taken. Equipment could be tampered with, supplies taken. Who bears the risk? What steps can you take to protect/insure the property?

Constraints

Are there elements of the existing landscape that you want or need to maintain?

A professional land use consultant with expertise in agriculture can help evaluate the property. Maps, aerial photos, and regular photos are useful for evaluation, and important when it comes to planning a farm or negotiating an agreement with a farming tenant.

SOIL STORIES

Ground-truthing

When the Somali Bantu Community Association and Little Jubba Central Maine Agrarian Commons were evaluating a piece of land for purchase for Liberation Farms, they were surprised to learn that Maine's state soil scientist would assess the soils free of charge. The scientist did a "ground-truthing" of the GIS soil map of the parcel, confirming that the land was suitable for vegetable farming.



Rebuilding

The friars at Our Lady of the Angels Province of Franciscan Friars Conventual have farmed their land in Ellicott City, Maryland, since 1928, most recently by leasing to a farmer who employed standard industrial methods of agriculture, using extensive chemicals and fossil fuels. In order to transition to growing organic food for the hot meal program at the Franciscan Center in Baltimore, they had to rebuild the depleted soils. Little Portion Farm began in 2017, when the friars delineated and fenced in three acres. Two successive years of cover crops were planted and tilled under to allow the soil to begin its recovery from its years of chemical treatment. In 2019, Little Portion Farm grew its first crops, producing 3,136 pounds of vegetables on a quarter acre of land. Over three years, the farm will expand the land under cultivation to maximize production on its full three acres.

Alternatives

If the soils on your land are unsuitable or contaminated, planting in raised beds may be an option. In some areas, government and nonprofit agencies provide consultation and/or funding for rehabilitation of contaminated sites, known as brownfields.

Engaging Your Neighborhood & Community

Faith communities are uniquely positioned to engage people with the land. Land stewardship, celebrations of the harvest, food-centered ceremonies, honoring of the land and Indigenous history, food access for underserved communities, and educating young people about land and food are resonant themes, regardless of the location, size, or type of farm. As a faith community, you will have unique opportunities to share your story about starting a farm or community garden or making land available for farming by others.

What is your relationship with the people who live near your land? Everyone and everything is interconnected; even the most rural farm does not exist in isolation. The neighborhood and surrounding community have an impact on your property's suitability for farming, and farming uses may impact neighbors and local residents. The neighborhood may appreciate—or at least tolerate—farming activity. If the property is in a more developed area and not previously used for agriculture, neighbors may not be familiar with farming realities. Members of an urban or suburban faith community also may not have direct experience with farming, and some may have inaccurate pictures of farming based on stories and experiences from other regions, or from their cultural past. However, a well-run farm enterprise can be harmonious with most neighborhoods and can provide multiple benefits and rewards for your neighbors as well as your faith community itself.



Farmers want to feel welcome and supported in the area where they live and work. Many cities, towns, and suburbs have lost touch with their farming roots, along with support services. Introducing or expanding farming in a neighborhood or wider community may require some public education, relationship building, and advocacy. While many residents support the idea of a farm in their neighborhood, they may not know what to expect. Tractor noise early in the morning, manure storage and spreading, truck traffic, odors, dust, composting, and spraying may be unwelcome to some, particularly if they aren't prepared. On the other hand, some residents may have negative cultural associations about farming and will warm to the idea only upon learning how the farm can benefit their families and neighbors.

If you engage the surrounding community early on, you can educate your neighbors along with members of your faith community or congregation about your vision and correct any misconceptions they may have. You can also seek their input and demonstrate your concern for their well-being and the well-being of the neighborhood and greater community.

HERE ARE SOME STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY SUPPORT:

Host gatherings to give neighbors and local residents a chance to learn how the farm parcel will be used to invite their questions and concerns.

Explain what the early stages will look like. For instance, let neighbors know that they may see a plastic tarp covering the lawn for three months before the land can be transitioned to vegetable farming.

Ask neighbors and community members what they want to see growing. Farmers may tailor their crop selection to local demand.

If the land is in an urban area, listen to any concerns that neighbors may have about gentrification. Invite their suggestions for ensuring that the farm supports the neighboring community.

Establish and maintain strong communication between your organization, the municipal government, and neighboring landowners. This will build understanding and strong support for farming activities.

Invite the mayor and neighborhood leaders to participate in groundbreaking events.

Let city leaders know about your successes. This will make them more likely to support you down the line.

Help leaders in your town or neighborhood understand the direct and indirect benefits of having a farm in your community.

Send out newsletters with updates about the farm's development and/or farm events.

Ask leaders from your Earth Care ministry to talk with members of the city or neighborhood council about their vision for a healthier community.

AN AGRICULTURAL ENTERPRISE CAN BE ESPECIALLY ATTRACTIVE TO A TOWN OR URBAN COMMUNITY. HERE'S WHY:

Farms contribute to the local economy and quality of life.

Most communities value working landscapes (even urban ones) and access to local food.

Families are drawn to farms that feature high-quality products, a farm stand, community supported agriculture (where community members purchase a share in the harvest), or activities open to the greater community, such as pick-your-own or farm dinners.

You can model conservation and sustainable land management, good farming practices, charitable and educational uses of faith community–owned land, and support for farming.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR URBAN FARMING:

What is your faith community's present and historic relationship with the neighborhood where the prospective parcel is located? Will your decision to farm be perceived as an intrusion into an already marginalized community?

How can you bring members of the neighborhood community into the planning process? How can you build long-term relationships within the community?

Are there any city ordinances that prevent or regulate farming activities in your neighborhood?

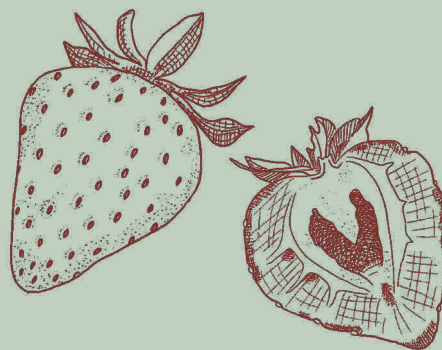
What can the neighborhood gain from the introduction of farming in their community? How might you benefit from the engagement of the neighborhood community?

What if your faith community wants to start a farm or garden, but you do not already own suitable land?

Some faith communities lease or purchase land to run community gardens and farms. Some negotiate leases with land-owning members of their faith community. Others lease at low cost from city or local government, other organizations, or members of the greater community.

TIPS/CONSIDERATIONS

The above considerations on site suitability apply whether you already own land or seek land to purchase or lease. You will want to evaluate the suitability of any parcel prior to agreeing to lease it. Choose an area or neighborhood where your faith community is or would like to be engaged, and where both your faith community and the surrounding community will benefit. While local engagement is not required for a successful farm, building relationships can help with everything from security to volunteer recruitment to earning the respect and enthusiasm of your neighbors. Leasing land in a disadvantaged community without plans to engage may perpetuate inequality and perceived and real injustices.



When seeking to lease land from others, you will want to consider some of the same questions that you would consider as a land-owner leasing to a farmer. ([See “Faith-based Land Use Partnerships” for more information about leases.](#)) Assess the time needed to make any improvements to the land, such as the installation of raised beds or the remediation of nutrient-poor soils, and take that time investment into account when deciding on the term of your lease agreement. In general, short-term leases are unfavorable to farms and gardens.

SEEKING LAND

First, create a statement about what you're looking for and what your goals are. This is where you describe what kind of property your faith community wants to garden or farm. You may want to complete [Land for Good's "Necessary, Desirable, Optional" worksheet](#) as part of this process. Articulating your goals is essential to members of your organization and can help persuade city leaders or other landowners to enter into a lease.

Next, share your vision. One way to find land is through community and professional networks. Share your goal and/or vision by word of mouth. Post your vision statement to social media and relevant listservs. Reach out to organizations that support farming and ranching in your region.

Many digital resources can support your search for land. Some states are served by an online Farm Link program that connects farmers with landowners. Most of these programs manage a list of properties posted by landowners looking to lease or sell. Some Land Link programs enable users to simply post what they're looking for and/or to scroll through postings of land available for sale or lease. Some have a more hands-on approach and will actively look to match land-seekers with landowners in their databases.

Look for your state's Farm Link program(s) on the [National Young Farmers Coalition's Land Link Directory](#) or [American Farmland Trust's Farm Link Directory](#).

Some cities and states also maintain free public databases of public and/or private land parcels that can be used to locate farmland. What you can learn from these databases and how easy they are to use varies quite a bit. Some cities have inventoried city-owned land that might be suited for agriculture, but these databases are not always well maintained. In some state and county databases, you can search for privately owned parcels with prime farmland soil.

You may also know of or find an apparently vacant piece of property that might be suitable for farming and is in a location accessible to your community. Some cities have initiatives to support the use of vacant lots for agriculture. If you are interested in a specific site, call the city or search the city's database to identify the owner. The process of locating a property owner or using digital tools to identify a promising parcel may require some persistence!

IDENTIFYING LAND OWNED BY YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY

Public databases may also be used to search for parcels owned by faith organizations, or even for parcels owned by your faith organization in particular. Conducting these kinds of searches can be complex. If you don't have a GIS expert in your faith community, you may want to enlist the aid of an organization like the Conservation Fund. Catholic congregations and dioceses uncertain of their landholdings can contract with [GoodLands](#), a nonprofit that has mapped the majority of Catholic-owned lands in the US.

For additional considerations on urban farming, see [Land for Good's "Farmland Access in Urban Settings."](#)



Your Relationship to the Land: Dreams & Expectations

Success with your land for farming will hinge on realistic expectations, a good fit, and good communications among the parties involved. Start by determining what is acceptable:

Are crops that require regular plowing and cultivating acceptable? Or do you prefer or require that the land not be plowed?

If soils on the property you choose to farm or lease are contaminated, will you consider and/or allow farming or gardening in raised beds?

What is your opinion about animals? Are certain animals less desirable, or not permitted?

What about farming practices? Some landowners feel strongly about “organic” or “no chemicals” (perhaps not knowing exactly what these mean). See ["Earth Care"](#) for more information on sustainable practices and certifications.

Would you allow or encourage perennial crops such as berries or fruit trees that have long life cycles and require a long-term commitment from both the farmer and the faith community, but involve little soil disturbance?

Would you permit a farmer to install fencing to keep animals in or to keep wildlife away from crops? What about other structures?

What are your stewardship and public-use goals and policies for the property? For example, is your property open to the public for hiking on trails and/or visiting the farm, or is public access restricted? Can public access and farming be combined?

Do you want the property to be used for education? How would this objective meet with a farmer’s ability to run a viable farming operation?

Are you managing for important or sensitive natural resources that need protecting? Can those protections be accommodated by farming, or does farming need to be confined to certain areas of the property?

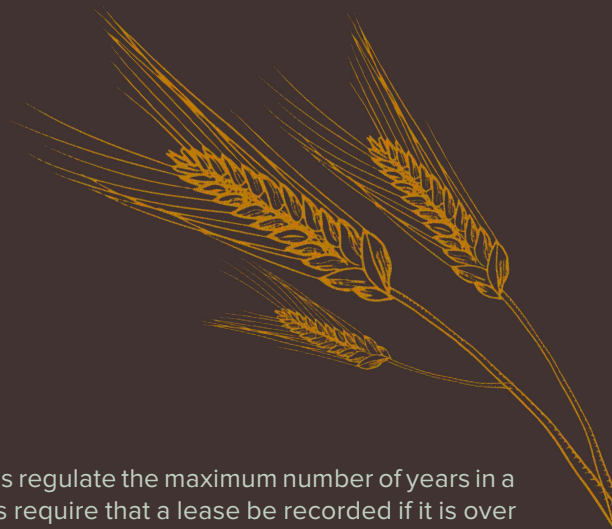
How do you hope your faith community, neighbors, and members of surrounding communities will interact with the farm?

If you plan to donate or transfer the land, is it suitable for the purposes for which the recipients hope to use it?



STATE REGULATIONS

As landowners, faith-based groups need to navigate the world of regulations. This guide does not go into detail about federal, state, and local regulations that might apply to farming on your land, nor does it go into specific state laws. Rather, we take a brief look at several regulatory categories that could impact your land and its agricultural land uses.



Lease term: Some states regulate the maximum number of years in a lease term. Some states require that a lease be recorded if it is over a certain number of years.

Wetlands and other water resources: These laws vary greatly among states; some are quite strict about agriculture in or near water resources. A state might require a permit or offer exemptions for farming activities. Some states regulate water withdrawal for farming.

Dwellings/other infrastructure: Depending on the state building code, locales may regulate construction of farm buildings (including restrictions on building in flood zones). Similarly, new residences, accessory dwelling units, temporary housing, and farm labor housing will all be subject to regulation.

Taxes: There are several important tax considerations when making land available for farming. Most are at the federal level. A faith-based entity has the additional layer of being an exempt charitable organization. It's critical to consult with a tax advisor on how to deal with rental income and property taxes, for example.

Nutrient/waste management: Excess nutrients (such as nitrogen and phosphorus) can pollute water, mainly from runoff. States play a critical role in addressing the impacts of agricultural nutrients on water quality. Some states regulate the application of manure on farmland. Others require farmers to have nutrient management plans. A third method of regulation is through certifying individuals who apply agricultural nutrients on the land. [The National Agricultural Law Center](#) charts methods used by different states.

Pesticide application: Similar to nutrient/waste management, states play a critical role in regulating pesticide applications on farms. This is typically done through certifying pesticide applicators. There may also be notification and posting requirements.

Zoning: Zoning is usually regulated at the municipal or county level, although authorized by states. The basic considerations around zoning are whether and which farming uses are permitted in a particular zone. Some zones allow agriculture by right. Some zones prohibit it entirely. Depending on the regulation, specific activities or uses may be prohibited or require special permits. Hogs, food processing, retail stores, and composting are examples. Farm signage, parking, access onto main roads, and structures, for example, may be regulated.



Photo courtesy of Intersection of Change.

STRENGTH TO LOVE 2

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN
2013

WHERE
Baltimore, Maryland

WHAT

a community based urban production farm

MISSION/PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Provide hands-on training for individuals returning to the community from incarceration; provide workforce development; confront food apartheid; be a visible symbol of transformation in the neighborhood

REVEREND Darriel Harris

Strength to Love 2 (S2L2) Farm began as an initiative of Newborn Community of Faith Church in the same way that many of our initiatives start: community listening and partner building. The community where the church lies and focuses its interest is called Sandtown-Winchester. It is a west Baltimore community named, in part, after the quarry on the edge of the neighborhood. As people from around the city would visit the quarry and purchase rock deposits for building projects, deposits would spill onto the street and appear as sand.

Our neighborhood has many assets: impassioned people, historical legacies, and a number of caring churches. However, we are a historically redlined community that still suffers from neglect, which has contributed to our having some of the largest arrest and recidivism rates in the state of Maryland. S2L2 was created to support any member of the community whose arrest record stifled their opportunities. The program seeks to support returning citizens through a barrage of services primarily centered on gainful employment.

Elder C.W. Harris was pastor at the time and had a close and binding relationship with Gordon Cosby of Church of the Savior in Washington, DC. Cosby, knowing of the S2L2 initiative, asked Elder Harris to consider a farming initiative with the son of one of his longtime associates, the founder of a for-profit business venture called Big City Farms.

Big City Farms and S2L2 formed a partnership to create the S2L2 Farm. Originally, the farm was slated to be profitable, and for a period it was. The land for the farm—a 1.5-acre vacant lot—was granted by the city of Baltimore for one dollar for five years and included free water access. The lot was the site of demolished homes within the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood. The agreement was that Big City Farms would supply the farming expertise and conduct all business dealings, while Newborn would provide the staff through connections within the community.

The model was to grow primarily salad varieties and sell them at the farmers' markets and various high-end restaurants.

S2L2 was created to support any member of the community whose arrest record stifled their opportunities.

The margins on salad varieties are high, they grow fast, and they can be grown twelve months a year.

Year-round farming was enabled by the installation of passive greenhouses called hoop houses or high tunnels. High tunnels are half-circle structures, about fifteen feet tall at their highest point, covered in plastic, creating a greenhouse effect. In the bitter winters, the temperatures inside the hoop houses are 20 to 30 degrees warmer than outdoors.

S2L2 Farm began with one hoop house. In 2013, we had a ribbon-cutting ceremony. The event was my first interaction with the farm. I had recently come back to the area after spending three years in North Carolina at seminary, followed by eighteen months as a missionary to South Sudan. The mayor was in attendance, along with several other high-profile personalities. The community was present in droves and media outlets were snapping pictures and taking notes. It was a great day for our community. A dream began to take form and the potential for our neighborhood created excitement for everyone.

Shortly after starting, one hoop house turned into two, and then ten. Elder Harris convinced people to buy into his vision and support the project financially. Donations helped purchase the additional hoop houses and equipment to assist the farming venture. Big City Farms also contributed. As new hoop houses were erected, any money we lacked for equipment and structure was supplied by Big City, who we paid back over time through food sales. We would farm and harvest, and Big City would purchase all that we harvested and distribute it through their networks.

The amounts we received from Big City were enough to pay our staff, and anything additional was re-invested. Roughly a year after beginning, there were sixteen hoop houses and a few small beehives.

As the farm expanded, the city also availed a building that was adjacent to the property initially allocated to us. The building was most recently used as a carwash and before that as an auto garage. We installed a bathroom in the building and used it as an office, storage, and post-harvest washing station. We also installed a walk-in refrigerator. A year or two into the venture, things were going well for S2L2 Farm. Unfortunately, things were not going so well for Big City Farms.

Big City Farms created a business model that had small margins and was only profitable with large quantities of sales. Aside from purchasing all we harvested, Big City had invested in a farm in another part of the city that comprised 24 hoop houses. Strong winds came one winter and destroyed almost all of them. After this storm, Big City Farms decided to stop operating.

S2L2 Farm decided to continue operating and take on the full responsibility of an entire farm. We knew most of the science behind growing, but we didn't know how much seedlings cost. We didn't know how to interact with customers, or how to package the produce in quantities that customers were expecting. And, suddenly, we didn't have the money to pay for staff.

The following year served as an effort to revitalize the farm and stabilize customer relations. We substantially grew our customer base and changed the farm model from for-profit to nonprofit. We made repairs in hoop houses that were damaged through vandalism, wind, and weathering. We winterized the post-harvesting shed where we wash and package our produce. We secured funds to replace the brush on the south side of the farm with edible trees and started growing and selling flowers in addition to food. We also added a workforce development program where 20 young adults work on the farm in various capacities over the summer. We opened a food stand on the farm and began distributing produce grown on the farm to our church and other churches within the neighborhood. We are praying for continued growth and improvements in the years to come.





Photo courtesy of Abundance Farm.

ABUNDANCE FARM

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN

2014

WHERE

Northampton, Massachusetts

WHAT

a pick-your-own garden and youth program run by a full-time farm manager

MISSION/PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Food justice; strong community; outdoor education experiences

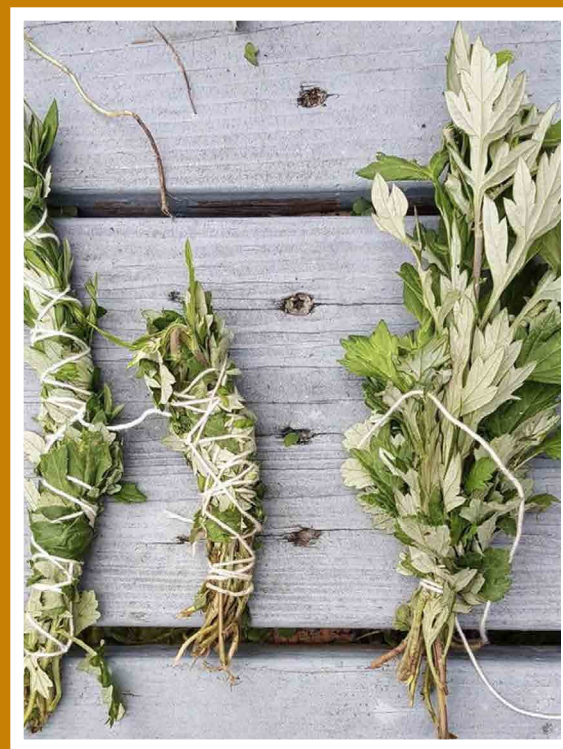
In 2011, two families who belonged to Congregation B'nai Israel had teenage kids who wanted to be a part of a project outside of the synagogue walls. They decided to build

It had already become a treasured community space; now, they wanted to build upon this land's rich history, to reclaim the land as a farm to grow community and serve local residents in need.

a garden in the field adjacent to their families' place of worship, which the congregation had purchased about ten years earlier. For years, the grassy one-acre site had served as a leaf dump. Long before that, it was part of a fifteen-acre farm run by (and for) residents of Northampton's Alms House. And even longer before that, the Indigenous peoples who inhabited what was then the village of Nonotuck cultivated maize and other crops in the area. All of these factors combined to create the soils that the farmers at Abundance Farm continue to build today.

With the help of many community members, the families cleared the land and built raised vegetable beds. Two years later, a group of people started working on a vision for expanding and transforming the garden into a small farm and outdoor classroom. It had already become a treasured community space; now, they wanted to build upon this land's rich history, to reclaim the land as a farm to grow community and serve local residents in need.

A volunteer leadership team with representatives from the synagogue and two close neighbors—Lander-Grinspoon Academy and the Northampton Survival Center—helped refine the vision, design the farm, and fundraise. After months of planning and collaboration, they hired a tractor to disc the land and launched Abundance Farm in the spring of 2014. More than 250 members of the community gathered to plant 50 fruit trees and 40 berry bushes in the sandier soils in the front half acre. They also established new planting beds.



The first year, their farm manager worked 10 hours a week. Then that grew to 20, and in 2017, with the help of funding from the Jewish Outdoor Food, Farming, and Environmental Educators Fellowship, Abundance Farm hired a full-time farm manager. The congregation and the farm share a water hookup and tools. And they share their faith. Over the years, they've donated thousands of pounds of produce to the Northampton Survival Center and hosted dozens of workshops, festivals, rituals, work parties, and potlucks.



E.

REPARATIVE JUSTICE

FROM THEORY TO REALITY

An integral ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics. The common good is 'the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment.'

—Pope Francis,
Laudato Si' No. 156

If only they had attempted the challenging path of goodness instead! / . . . / It is to free a slave, / or to give food in times of famine / to an orphaned relative / or to a person in distress, / and—above all—to be one of those who have faith and urge each other to perseverance / and urge each other to compassion.

—Qur'an 90:11–18

Truth — Reciprocity — Reconciliation — Repair

We begin by remembering the Ancestors—those who first walked the land where we walk and those who drank first from the waters that we drink from today.

These ancestors stewarded, thrived, struggled with and left the land, passing on to us the gift of life. We are indebted to them, and called to repair our relationships to the land, one another, and all living beings.

Next, we ask you to remember that the lands where you live, those you occupy and steward, the lands you were stolen from and the lands that were stolen from you—all these lands are alive with many beings, kindred you may never meet. But it is not enough to love the land: people's connection to the land and right to steward and live from it must be defended.

No matter your faith, we invite you and your faith community to look at the land you own and ask, how did this land come to be in our possession? From whose labor has it benefited? Who can benefit from it now? What would be the most just use of this land?

What is reparative justice?

Reparative justice seeks to repair harm done to an individual, community, and/or the descendants of either. It is a civic platform for justice meant to repair relationships dam-

aged by injustice. However, the work to repair social and economic harm or state-sanctioned violence is complex. When we are discussing the work to make right an injustice, restore the rights of peoples who are spiritually connected to landscape, or recover the fertility of soils that have suffered the same environmental injustices as the people living on them, reparative justice must be a spiritual endeavor as well.

The spirit of reparative justice is not compensatory, corrective, or merely transactional. It must be reciprocal for healing and reconciliation to take place.

In the movement for racial equality, environmental justice, and ecological health, the call for reparative justice reinforces the call for sustainable stewardship and becomes most effective in land sovereignty work. In 2012, the Transnational Institute defined land sovereignty as “the right of working peoples to have effective access to, use of, and control over land and the benefits of its use

and occupation, where land is understood as a resource, territory, and landscape.”²⁴

For the faithful and their institutions to contribute to repairing long and deep injustices, their work must center on matters of land.

KEY CONCEPTS:

Reparations is the act of making amends. Land-based reparations are the act of giving or returning land to African Americans or members of other groups who have historically been dispossessed of their land and/or who have confronted barriers to land access in the form of systematic discrimination. Monetary reparations focus on compensating members of groups who have been subject to discrimination.

Rematriation works “to restore a people to their rightful place in sacred relationship with their ancestral land.”²⁵ For Indigenous peoples in the United States, rematriation encompasses the return, or gifting, of ancestral lands as well as other acts that renew relationship to land, such as returning sacred seeds to Indigenous seed keepers on or near their ancestral lands.

Reciprocity is a mutual exchange of rights, respect, accountability, engagement, understanding, and support.

Land return most commonly refers to the return of land to Indigenous peoples; it seeks to redress the ongoing occupation of Indigenous lands by the US. Land return considers the sovereignty of the land and emphasizes regenerative relationships over the promises of production.

Cultural respect easements, cultural respect agreements, and cultural use permits are contractual agreements that allow members of a tribe or group access to a piece of land for traditional land-based practices (fishing, hunting, foraging), ceremonial use, and/or cultural education. Easements may also assign a tribe and its members stewardship responsibilities.

Reparations & Rematriation: Definitions & Histories



Reparative justice is a broad and inclusive approach to repairing harms or injustices. It assumes the shape of the community wronged. For communities such as the descendants of enslaved Africans, who have been dispossessed and displaced, marginalized, murdered, and unfairly imprisoned, reparations tends to be the term most embraced. For Indigenous communities who have been generationally maligned by the overarching and lingering effects of colonialism, we speak of rematriation as a system of solutions.

ON REPARATIONS

Historically, reparations are court-ordered financial payments intended to provide closure to those who've faced discrimination and/or grievous injustices through acknowledgement and some amount of compensation. For example, in 2006, the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement established a multi-billion dollar fund to be paid by the Canadian government to those impacted by the traumas endured over generations after a century of ethnic, sexual, malnutrition, neglect, and abusive programming in Indian residential schools.²⁶ This was seen as a landmark in reparative approaches. Similar legislation provided redress by the government of the US for wrongful internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and by the government of Germany to Holocaust victims. Reparations were even paid to former slaveholders for the so-called loss of property when slavery was abolished in Britain.²⁷ However, for Black people, particularly those descended from kidnapped, marooned, and enslaved Indigenous Africans, the case for reparations is still open.

By design, the descendants of enslaved Africans in the US live in a consistently precarious financial, social, and political situation. Africans were brought to the US for both their agricultural ability and their resistance to “Old World” diseases.²⁸ They were made to understand the dispossession of their being and traded as commodities, billed as excellent sources of free labor and wealth generation. A good deal of the country's wealth is derived from the labor of exploited and enslaved Africans and their direct descendants in cultivating the land.²⁹ In January 1865, twenty Black religious leaders met with Union military leaders including the US Secretary of War and General William T. Sherman to discuss “matters relating to the freedmen of the State of Georgia.”

Of the twenty, one Rev. Garrison Fraizer was chosen to respond to questions. When asked how the freedmen thought they could take care of themselves, the reverend responded, “The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn and till it by our own labor . . . We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own.”³⁰

The argument that free Black people should receive land found a small perch among the Republican party, but materially can not be said to have gone anywhere, or to have manifested lands for any Black persons. General Sherman’s Field Order 15, which infamously confiscated four hundred thousand acres of Southern land and redistributed it to newly freed Black families in forty-acre segments, was reversed in short order by President Andrew Johnson, who returned the land to white planters.³¹

Meanwhile, Southern states established black codes, the first of a generation of laws that restricted the movement and civil rights of free Black people. Just as enslaved peoples were exploited and forbidden from citizenship, their free Black descendants were systematically terrorized. They were denied not only health and human services but protections from violent white mobs and lynchings during the legalized racial segregation period known as the Jim Crow era. In 1919, Black sharecroppers in Elaine, Arkansas, joined a union and gathered to negotiate fair wages, and rumors spread that they were leading an insurrection against white residents. In a devastatingly familiar sequence of events, the death of one white man was used to justify the indiscriminate slaughter of at least two hundred African Americans. Not one white soldier or vigilante was charged with murder, yet twelve Black men were charged in murdering the five white men who died in the conflict. Although the murder trial reached the US Supreme Court, where the defendants were exonerated and their right to due process was upheld, neither the loss of life nor the psychological and social impacts of the massacre were ever rectified.³²

In addition, Black Americans experienced discrimination from realtors, lenders, and the USDA. Even efforts to provide land access to Black farmers were discriminatory; the Southern Homestead Act gave Black families preferential access to homestead in five states, but the majority of available land was unsuitable for farming, and few families had the financial resources needed to relocate and found a farm.³³ In 1999, the USDA settled the first of two class-action cases acknowledging that the agency had systematically denied loans and services to Black farmers on the basis of race between 1983 and 1997.³⁴

The African-American community, particularly descendants of enslaved Africans, are in need of a program of reparations that embodies a restorative ethic. The objective is to restore conditions that will support the health and conviviality of communities of marginalized peoples on the lands they steward, currently and historically. The redistribution of land-based wealth with origins in slave labor can provide African Americans with the means to establish and sustain ethical economies and vibrant communities. Through land-based reparations, individuals and faith communities have the opportunity to participate in building infrastructures of reciprocity that encourage a political and social sense of belonging and care.

ON REMATRIATION

Steven Newcomb, who is Shawnee/Lenape and formerly served as executive director of the Indigenous Law Institute, introduced the concept of rematriation to an international audience in 1995. Rematriation is used to distinguish work that seeks to nourish all human beings’ connection to the ecological landscape and the diverse life within, from the work to receive back property deeds and “skeletal remains and sacred ceremonial objects” to the work of protecting landscapes and stewarding the diverse life within them to the work of organizing imperial institutions and individuals in efforts to return land acquired in colonization.³⁵

This work requires an understanding of the history of land theft in the US. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI published a papal bull, the “*Inter Caetera*,” that effectively allowed any Christian the ability to claim the land of any non-Christian in the name of ruling Christian monarchs.³⁶ This edict urged the conversion of Indigenous peoples whose land had been taken and was the spiritual foundation of the dominance of European settlers, Christian by name and birth, in the American colonies and throughout the globe.

Taking the bull as a blessing, Spaniards, Portuguese, and English, in the name of Christianity, began a series of land theft campaigns against Indigenous peoples, forcibly removing persons from their ancestral territories, enslaving communities, and decimating nations. Thus began a long, slow, and sticky violence in which people indigenous to the Americas and elsewhere were on the receiving end.

Although Pope Paul III denounced the enslavement and dehumanization of Indigenous peoples in 1537, the 1493 bull set a precedent for what in international law is known as the Doctrine of Discovery. The US Supreme Court invoked the concept in an 1823 ruling that granted a “discovering” state exclusive rights to purchase Indigenous land. While it acknowledged that the original inhabitants of the disputed land were “rightful occupants of the soil,” the Court determined that “their rights to complete sovereignty as independent nations were necessarily diminished” because discovery “gave exclusive title to those who made it.”³⁷

In colonizing the North American continent, the US has taken some 1.5 billion acres of land from Indigenous communities.³⁸ Between 1778 and 1868, the US ratified about 368 treaties with various tribal nations. Many of the treaties signed made provisions for reservations. During that period, in 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, forcing thousands of Native Americans to migrate from ancestral lands to the West. The forced migration lasted seventeen years and resulted in more than eight thousand Indigenous deaths. Eight years after the last treaty was signed, the imperial laws of the US began to eat away at reservation lands, resulting in the loss of over ninety million acres of reservation land from Indigenous ownership and stewardship.³⁹

Rowen White, a seedkeeper and farmer from the Mohawk community of Akwesasne, says that rematriation “simply means back to Mother Earth, a return to our origins, to life and co-creation, rather than Patriarchal destruction and colonization, a reclamation of germination, of the life giving force of the Divine Female.”⁴⁰ Rematriation as a practice relies upon the traditional ecological knowledge of the sovereign and Indigenous persons who traditionally cared—and will continue to care—for the given land.

Land return is a form of rematriation that considers the sovereignty of the land as well as the people, and emphasizes regenerative relationships over the promises of production.

Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, an Indigenous-led land trust in the San Francisco Bay Area, understands rematriation as the work “to restore a people to their rightful place in sacred relationship with their ancestral land.”⁴¹ Much of the work of rematriation is found

in the diverse, regenerative agricultural practices that Indigenous farmers and land stewards have passed down over generations.

But countless stories have been lost, and the number of stewards with access to traditional ecological knowledge are dwindling. Even greater is the loss of access

to lands upon which they may practice.

In its most direct form, rematriation is a popularly supported return of peoples to their ancestral lands and the establishment of infrastructure to sustain and benefit their stewardship of the lands, waters, and diverse life within. Land return is a form of rematriation that considers the sovereignty of the land as well as the people, and emphasizes regenerative relationships over the promises of production. Faith communities and their institutions have the opportunity to support this work by donating land to tribes.



Strategies for Reparations

Specifically, the invoice should go directly to the US Congress, the legislative branch of the national government.”⁴²

The faithful who are blessed and favored with land holdings or land-based wealth have the power and unique privilege to lead by example, beyond and despite any hopes that the US government will follow.

If you hold faith, doing right by the land that nourishes you, that holds you up, is a sacred work. Below are some ideas on how to do just that.



ONE: ENGAGE THE MEMBERS OF YOUR CONGREGATION OR FAITH COMMUNITY.

All movements start with singular actions. As a member of a congregation or faith community, you can build your community's interest in land-based reparations and rematriation. To build engagement among members of a specific ministry or your congregation as a whole:

Share reading material on the history of the land upon which your community gathers/worships.

Share links to video and audio content produced by or about the struggles of the peoples most impacted by land loss around your place of gathering/worship.

Host formal or informal discussions of seminal texts and lectures on traditional ecological knowledge and land justice, such as the writings of Robin Wall Kimmerer, Leah Penniman, Jillian Hishaw, and Monica White.

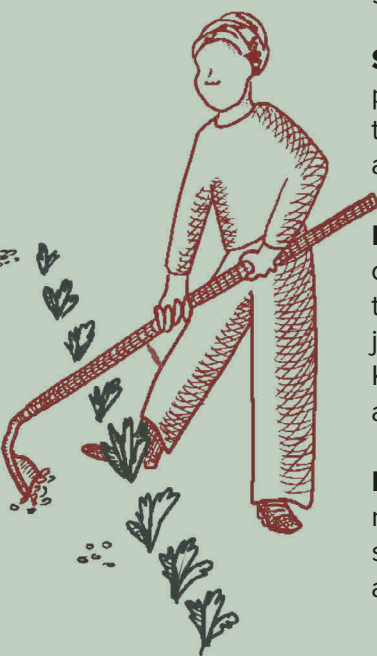
Establish a core group that will conduct research, plan events, and lead discussions regarding land-based reparations and rematriation.

If your faith community is majority white, consider engaging in equity training with the [Racial Equity Institute](#), the [Interaction Institute for Social Change](#), or another organization with a justice-centered mission.

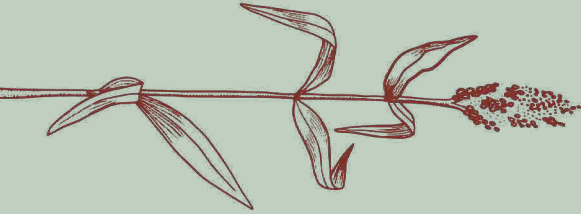
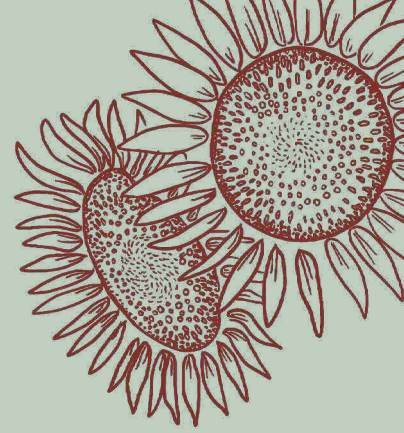
Invite members from your core group to lead conversations and sharing about historical complicity in slavery and land theft. Given the difficulty of these conversations, it is important that each group member select strategies that suit their nature and skill set.

Invite a guest speaker to discuss the history and present of the persons and communities Indigenous to the place where you now gather/worship. If you invite someone whose knowledge is predominantly historical, balance their perspective by inviting another speaker equipped to speak of the current work, initiatives, and/or needs of said Indigenous communities.

Invite a guest speaker to discuss the history of the persons and communities whose ancestors' labor is responsible for the economic vitality of your faith community as a whole, or whose unpaid labor tilled the land and laid the foundation of the building where you now gather/worship.



Performing such actions in community will help to establish a core group who can lead your faith community in the work of reciprocity and reparative justice. With this group established, the next step is to articulate your goals/principles concerning land justice. Here are some questions to consider:



Is your land situated on unceded ancestral lands of a tribe indigenous to the area?

Was slave labor utilized in the construction of your house of worship, or in the generation of wealth that has enabled your congregation to acquire/hold land on which to pray?

Which peoples in your area are in the greatest need of land, access to land, renewal of land-based practices, and/or recognition?

Are there peoples in your area whose needs you are unaware of, or whose needs you have previously considered in the framework of charity rather than in the framework of reparative justice? How can you learn more about their needs and goals?

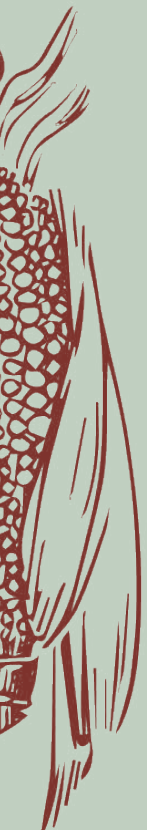
Has your congregation or faith community publicly repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery? Have you publicly declared your solidarity with Black Americans?

Does your institution, congregation, or community hold land that is currently underutilized (for instance, a one- or ten-acre lawn)? Does your community hold land that is of cultural significance to peoples indigenous to the area, or to those whose ancestors cultivated land and culture while enslaved?

What are your motivations? What do you hope to accomplish? How can your faith community benefit from engaging in reparative justice? How can the BIPOC community benefit? What needs to be healed?

What community systems and social infrastructures are in place that support accountability and reciprocity? Are the infrastructures built non-extractive and non-exploitative? Do they erase or obscure culture or genocide?

Answering these questions will help you articulate a preliminary set of principles and goals in the work of reparative justice. The next essential step is building relationships with the people and organizations whose work you wish to support.



TWO: ENGAGE THE PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS WHOSE WORK YOU WISH TO SUPPORT. PARTICIPATE IN TRUTH-TELLING AND ADVOCACY.

Reparative justice is reciprocal, meaning that it is necessarily undertaken in conversation and collaboration. You are in need of a community in which you can practice reciprocity perhaps more than those without land or resources, for the success of this work requires that you build relationships with and let yourselves be guided by the peoples whose access to land and land-based practices you wish to support.

If your faith community is just beginning to engage in the work of reparations and rematriation, consider the following steps/strategies:



Learn about local organizations that represent or advocate for the peoples you wish to support. Ask what they are working on; find out what kind of support they need and want. Before proposing how you can help, reflect on whether what you want to offer aligns with their needs and purpose.

Build relationships with those most impacted by land loss in your area. Take the time to listen. Work against the reflexive defense of your privilege; allow for discomfort. Understand that building trust can be a slow process.

Continue to engage members of your faith community. Share what you learn about peoples and organizations with whom you want to invite collaboration.

Campaign to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery. If your denominational leadership has already repudiated the doctrine, you can reiterate their repudiation by making public statements of solidarity with local tribes. If leadership has not repudiated the doctrine, work with your core group in generating support within and beyond the walls of your individual congregation.

Advocate on behalf of local tribes, land access for Black farmers, and land justice for other marginalized/disadvantaged groups, including refugees and limited English speakers who seek land to lease/buy to farm. Remember to follow the lead of those for whom you advocate.

Support voluntary land tax programs and encourage your religious and spiritual institutions to do the same.

Issue a series of statements in support of work in reparations/rematriation and the righting of historic wrongs, and determine a way in which those statements are integrated into the daily practice and perspective of your spiritual community.

Use fluency in English and dominant culture, as well as white/wealth privilege, in service of others, as requested by those others. (For instance, you might help with fundraising, creation of a nonprofit, or evaluating land.)

Promote existing Afro-ecological projects run by people of color who express solidarity with Black and Indigenous peoples in visible and material ways.

THREE: REMATRIATE. RESTORE. REPAIR. RETURN.



Returning or gifting land to a displaced or dispossessed people is a powerful restorative act. While land return and land-based reparations are not the end of the social problems and wrongs created through colonization, they are critical moves in the right direction.

Land is the basis for the self-determination of all peoples. This includes displaced and dispossessed tribes, many of which have been denied acknowledgment as well as land. This includes the descendants of enslaved peoples who were not offered land upon their emancipation, and whose relationship to the land has been damaged over generations of displacement and discrimination. This includes, too, the agricultural workers who have suffered land loss in their home countries before fleeing to the US in search of safety and employment.

If your faith community holds land and is in conversation about land return or land-based reparations, the activities and questions above can help you build support within your congregation and build relationships with those in need in your neighborhood and region.

To move forward with a gift or transfer of land:

A. Map and record your faith community's land assets.

B. Conduct or contract others to conduct a site evaluation to determine if the parcel(s) are appropriate for farming or other land-based practices.

C. Learn about different ways to gift or transfer land. [Options for Transferring Land](#) from the Sustainable Economies Law Center provides an excellent overview of the pros and cons of different approaches. "[Partnering with a Land Trust](#)" explores a variety of scenarios.

D. Find inspiration in the stories of others who have gifted or received the [gift of land](#).

E. Familiarize yourself with the laws around gifting and transferring land, including tax law. Find an aligned attorney.

F. Get in contact with someone who chooses to do the work of holding space and brokering connections around land acknowledgment and land return. This might be [Land For Good](#), [Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust](#), [First Light](#), a local tribe, or a local elder. If this person or organization is BIPOC-led, compensate them equitably and be mindful of your requests for their time.

G. Involve key stakeholders from your faith community and the community who will receive the gift. It is essential to consider the desirability of the gift along with any concerns the prospective recipient may have, including the risk of being subjected to retaliation.

H. Revisit and clearly articulate your faith community's goals and principles. Understand what the donation will and will not mean to those who receive the gift. Take into account what will be necessary for the recipient to sustain ownership of the land, whether that be placing the land in an irrevocable trust to prevent future disputes or running a capital campaign to cover the cost of property taxes for the recipient's first few years of ownership.

If you have built a relationship with a people or organization in need of land but do not hold land or do not have the rights to gift or otherwise let go of your land, consider these strategies to support your allies:

Donate assets or funds to support BIPOC-led land trusts and land-based organizations.

Redirect resources to support Black or Indigenous farming or land-based organizations.

Conduct a parishioner assessment to determine attendees' professional line of work and identify ways to offer services pro bono to Indigenous and Black communities.

Initiate a voluntary rent or land tax program in your county or state.

Initiate or support fundraising and capacity-building efforts led by tribal nonprofits and farms and land-based projects run by people of color. Connect your allies with grant opportunities.

Hold a meaningful event where donations collected from your congregation or spiritual community are contributed to capital campaigns for Indigenous/Black/Latinx/queer acquisition of land for agriculture or communal/ceremonial use.

Advocate and support the development of cultural respect easements.

Encourage couples who marry in your congregation to invite donations to a tribal nonprofit in place of wedding gifts.

If your faith community owns but is not ready or able to donate land, consider offering discounted and/or long-term leases to marginalized/disadvantaged groups seeking land for farming and land-based practices. ([Learn more about leasing here.](#))

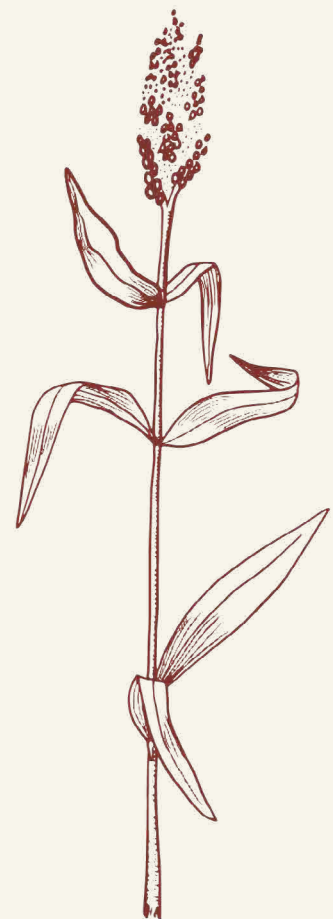
Lobby local and federal representatives on behalf of unrecognized tribes who are fighting for federal recognition and/or trying to secure land for their community.

Lobby local and federal representatives in favor of reparations, or legislation that supports the evaluation of reparations.

Support food sovereignty by hosting pop-up markets for BIPOC farmers.

Make your kitchen available for production of value-added products.

The act of gifting land is an unraveling of the logic of white supremacy under which the selling and buying of land is a continuation of exploitative practices, and an embrace of the rematriating logic is a step in a direction that will help us to weather climate and ecological crisis as best we can.



RESOURCES

[Options for Transferring Land](#) from the Sustainable Economies Law Center
[Land Reparations and Indigenous Solidarity Toolkit](#)
from Resource Generation
[Land Loss Prevention Project](#)
[National Black Food & Justice Alliance](#)
[Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust](#)



Photo courtesy of Makoce Ikiikcupi.

MAKOCE IKIKCUP I + MOUNTAIN LAKE

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN
2009

WHERE

Minisota Makoce, Dakota homeland in Granite Falls, Minnesota

WHAT

a nonprofit dedicated to land recovery for the Dakota people

MISSION/PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES

To help Dakota people reconnect with our homeland; to purchase land to establish communities committed to Dakota ways of being and sustainability; to help repair harm to the lands and waters under colonial occupation

MAKOCE IKIKCUPU

Waziyatawin

Minisota Makoce, or Land Where the Waters Reflect the Skies, is part of the ancient homeland of the Dakota *Oyate* (People). The *Bdewakantunwan* (Dwellers by

Mystic Lake) creation story places our origins where the Minnesota River joins the Mississippi River. From the beginning, our people have always been here. Just as our people were created from the clay of *Ina Maka* (Mother Earth), so too have the millions of bones of our ancestors become one with the earth. We are the land and the land is us. The land carries the memory of our presence, the songs we have sung, the tears we have shed, the laughter we shared, and the prayers we have made.

With invasion and colonization, our relationship with our homeland was disrupted. A foreign power sought our eradication from the land to make way for others, people who relinquished their own connection to a faraway homeland so they could colonize ours. After our war with the US government in 1862, the colonizers claimed our land and implemented policies of genocide and terrorism. With forced removal to reservations in the West and bounties on our heads, the idea was to strike such terror into the hearts and minds of our people that we would not dare to return to Minisota Makoce. Once our population was subjugated, settlers could engage in the full scale exploitation of our homeland without fear of retribution from its Original People.

**A foreign power sought
our eradication from the
land to make way for others,
people who relinquished
their own connection to a
faraway homeland so they
could colonize ours.**

It is hard to imagine a more destructive culture. In less than two centuries, Americans have destroyed 90 percent of Minnesota's wetlands, 98 percent of white pines, 98 percent of the Big Woods region in the south, and 99 percent of the prairies. In 2020, our homeland suffers from the loss of topsoil and clean water, poisoning, and desertification from industrial agricultural practices. These practices, along with environmental damage and toxic runoff from mining, manufacturing, and energy production, have precipitated the collapse of local ecosystems.

Our nonprofit *Makoce Ikikcupi*, or Land Recovery, emerged in this context. We consider it to be a project of reparative justice. Settlers who have benefited from genocide, land theft, and our dispossession have contributed to a land buy-back program since 2009

to help Dakota people, especially those landless and in exile, reconnect with our homeland. Our dream is to purchase parcels of land so that we may establish communities committed to Dakota ways of being and sustainability. Though rooted in traditional practices, our land recovery effort is also embedded in a colonial reality. It acknowledges

that we no longer have the freedom to traverse our homeland, migrating according to food patterns and ceremonial life, and it acknowledges the need to help repair harm to the lands and waters under colonial occupation.

In 2019, Makoce Ikikcupi purchased our first parcel of land in Granite Falls, Minnesota, where we are in the process of building Dakota earth lodges. We hope this will be the first of many purchases that will revive our relationship with our beloved homeland.



MOUNTAIN LAKE

John Stoesz

My hometown is Mountain Lake, Minnesota, where there is no mountain and the lake was drained for farmland in the early 1900s. (In 1937, a creek was dammed to create the lake that is there today.) I grew up with a view of history as shallow as that farmland.

When I was in fifth grade in the mid-1960s, my class took a field trip to Traverse des Sioux, the treaty site where in 1851, Dakota leaders signed away most of southern Minnesota to the US government. It was many years before I learned the truth about this treaty. The land was stolen through starvation, military threat, and outright deceit. We also learned in class about the US–Dakota war of 1862. It was, again, many decades later that I learned the truth about this war.

The pivotal question for me became, what does it mean to benefit from Dakota genocide, forced removal, and stolen land?

In a speech before the Minnesota legislature, then-Minnesota governor Alexander Ramsey declared, “The Sioux Indians . . . must be exterminated or driven forever beyond the boundaries of the state.” Minnesota paid large cash bounties for “dead Indians.”

After almost all the Dakota people of Minnesota were killed or forced out, immigrants from Europe flooded into the state. They were attracted by the offer of “free” land through the Homestead Act. Many of the early settlers in the Mountain Lake area were German Mennonites, including my paternal great-grandparents.

Mennonites emphasize discipleship, following the way of Jesus in everyday life. This results in a commitment to justice for the poor.

A large part of my faith commitment is to work for justice for the oppressed. The pivotal question for me became, what does it mean to benefit from Dakota genocide, forced removal, and stolen land?

In 2012, my family sold my grandparents’ farm in southwestern Minnesota. I had to decide what to do with my share of the inheritance. I talked with the Indigenous Visioning Circle of the Mennonite Central Committee. Harley Eagle put me in touch with Waziyatawin, the founder of Makoce Ikikcupi (Land Recovery in Dakota).

I read her book, *What does Justice Look Like? The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland*. Reading the book and talking with Waziyatawin in person were life-changing experiences. I knew what I had to do. Since the farm was Dakota homeland, I donated half the sale amount from my portion to Native organizations working for land justice—most to Makoce Ikikcupi.

Why half? I recalled the biblical story of Zacchaeus, the rich tax collector who knew that in order to follow Jesus he had to make a big change. He returned half his wealth to the poor, and four times as much to anyone he personally defrauded. The lesson was clear: If you benefit from an oppressive system, you must make reparations to the oppressed.



Cecile Hansen, tribal chairwoman. Photo by Alex Garland.

REAL RENT DUWAMISH

A collaboration between the Duwamish Tribe and the Coalition of Anti-racist Whites

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN
Indigenous Peoples' Day 2017

WHERE
Seattle, Washington

WHAT

monthly rent from residents of Seattle, King County, and beyond, voluntarily paid to the Duwamish Tribe

MISSION/PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Solidarity with the Duwamish people

This we know; The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know, all things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected.

—Chief Si'ahl, chief of the Duwamish and Suquamish tribes and namesake of the city of Seattle

We have done a lot with very little, and only with the help of citizens.

— Jolene Haas, director of the Duwamish Longhouse & Cultural Center

THE DUWAMISH (DKHW'DUW'ABSH)

of the Pacific Northwest have been fighting for federal recognition for forty years.

The story of their struggle begins in 1855, when Chief Si'ahl signed the Treaty of Point Elliott. Like many such treaties, this treaty guaranteed hunting and fishing rights and reservations—designated land—to all tribes represented by the Native signers. In return, the Duwamish Tribe exchanged over 54,000 acres of their homeland. Today those 54,000 acres include the cities of Seattle, Renton, Tukwila, Bellevue, and Mercer Island.

The city of Seattle was named for Chief Si'ahl, who along with his people assisted Europeans in their “settlement” of the area. But Seattle’s early civic leaders—those for whom many city streets are now named—protested the establishment of a reservation for the Tribe. The Duwamish were promised one piece of land after another; ultimately, they were given nothing. In 1895, settlers burned down one of the Tribe’s largest villages. In 1916 and 1917, a ship canal was built, Lake Washington dropped nine feet, and the Black River, where the Duwamish had fished for generations, disappeared.

Fast-forward to the 1960s: tribal members were getting arrested for fishing. It was that, not the desire for land or property or casino income, that led the Tribe to begin the legal battle for federal recognition.

The Tribe filed their first petition for recognition in 1978, and has been working for acknowledgment ever since. Leadership has been continuous for 85 years and Tribe members have proven their Duwamish ancestry. Their petition for federal recognition has been denied, accepted, and then denied again.

Because of that, the Duwamish Tribal Council oversees a nonprofit organization with a board of directors. After many years of seeking land, in the 1990s the Tribe purchased a third of an acre and built a longhouse on land across the street from where their ancestors’ village was arsoned in 1895, across from the Duwamish River. A capital campaign allowed them to do so. Out of support of the Duwamish, a landowner agreed to let the Tribe make payments for the purchase of the land even though they did not have any assets to back the agreement.

Today, Seattle and King County's residents can choose to pay "rent" to the Tribe whose land they inhabit. Real Rent Duwamish is an easy-to-use website through which residents can set up regular payments that go directly as the Tribe sees fit. (Network for Good, the giving platform, deducts as a processing fee of 3 percent from each donation transaction. Ninety-seven percent of donations go directly to the tribe.)

For Jolene Haas, current longhouse director, Real Rent Duwamish is part of a larger campaign. The monetary contributions help sustain the longhouse, but the contributions are more than financial gestures. What Real Rent has also done is legitimize the Tribe's fight for recognition, which has far more implications than many non-Natives realize. In 2015, an act was passed requiring that Seattle schools teach Native American history, but that of only federally recognized tribes. There's an ongoing movement to get the Seattle school board to include the Duwamish in teaching and textbooks because recognition of the Tribe's historical presence in the region is key to their cultural survival.

THE COALITION OF ANTI-RACIST WHITES (CARW) is a coalition of white people in the Seattle area whose mission is to "undo institutional racism and white privilege through education and organizing in white communities and active support of anti-racist, people-of-color-led organizations."

The Duwamish Solidarity group, an action subgroup of CARW, first met in 2009. They were focused on working towards racial justice while partnering and building relationships with the Duwamish. Inspired by tribal chairwoman Cecile Hansen, members of the group had the idea to create a voluntary land tax, and they consulted with the Tribe about their idea of creating Real Rent Duwamish. This group of volunteers runs the program; they volunteered time and funds to consult with the Tribe and establish the website, and the group continues to be all-volunteer.

Money earned through Real Rent Duwamish has enabled the tribal council to hire additional staff, to pay existing staff fairer wages, and to cover maintenance and repair costs at the longhouse. It also gives "renters" the opportunity to acknowledge the Duwamish and to lead by taking the action of compensating the Tribe.

The Duwamish Solidarity group also continues to advocate for the Duwamish. For Indigenous Peoples' Day 2019, the group signed and published a letter of support, identifying as allies of the Duwamish and outlining actions that others can take to promote recognition of the Duwamish people. Proposed actions include encouraging the incorporation of Duwamish history in curriculum in Seattle Public Schools and promoting engagement between City agencies and the Duwamish in decisions that affect the Tribe.



F.

PARTNERING WITH A LAND TRUST

GIFTING,
SELLING,
PROTECTING,
OR MANAGING
YOUR LAND

The loss of land plays out in our everyday lives and it shapes how we look at things and how we feel about ourselves. We've spent fifteen years in the Bay Area doing community organizing in the Indian community. And honestly, all the issues we're struggling with come down to land. You know, the land was taken and that was such a deep soul wound. The taking of the land, the heart of the people, was the cause of a lot of problems. And I believe that with the land trust, and you know, the land itself, I think that's really going to help us to find our way back.

—Johnella LaRose,
cofounder/director of
Sogorea Te' Land Trust

Why Transfer Land?

Gifting land, transferring land, or entrusting land or management of land to a land trust can be a powerful way to serve the greater community and the health of the earth itself.

Land ownership is at the heart of America's perennial farm crisis, and the history of land ownership is at the heart of the social injustices that cause conflict and division among citizens and neighbors. The Homestead Act of 1862 advertised "free" land in the Western United States to any qualifying citizen willing to till it. Though aimed to encourage small family farms and counter plantation-style farming that depended on the labor of the enslaved, homesteading depended on the continued theft of land from Indigenous peoples. At the peak of this era, the vast majority of land deeded was to immigrants and citizens of European ancestry;⁴³ as a result of this and other factors, including discrimination against African Americans⁴⁴ and a broad range of racist immigration policies,⁴⁵ white landownership increased over generations, even as the demographics of immigrants changed. Today, immigrants often work the land, supporting the industrial food system with long hours of underpaid labor, but are still disenfranchised from ownership.

If your faith community is committed to racial justice and reconciliation, donating land (or funds generated from the sale of land) is a means to demonstrate that commitment. If your faith community is committed to local food security and care for the land, partnering with a land trust is a means to protect land from development and keep it in farming beyond the lives of the current members of your congregation's Earth Ministry or your monastery's garden team.

The process of transferring land can be complex, but also worthwhile. Your approach will be influenced by factors including:

Your connection and proximity to the land

The **land's suitability** for agriculture or traditional land-based practices

The **interest of farmers** or land stewards whose work/mission/access to land your community wants to support

The **commitment and permission** of regional faith leaders

KEY CONCEPTS:

A **land transfer** is the process by which an owner transfers the ownership title of a property to another individual or organization.

A **land trust** is a nonprofit organization dedicated to land conservation and land stewardship, often but not only by protecting land from development.

A **community land trust** is a community-run nonprofit that acquires and manages land parcels in service of a community.

A **cultural respect easement, cultural respect agreement, or cultural use permit** is an agreement between a landowner and a tribe or group that assigns tribal/group members the right to access a piece of land for traditional land-based practices, ceremonial use, and/or cultural education. Easements may also assign a tribe/group and its members stewardship responsibilities.

A **conservation easement** is an agreement between a landowner and a qualifying conservation organization such as a land trust that limits the uses of land in order to protect the land, whether for animal habitat, restoring and preserving healthy watersheds and ecosystems, protecting viewsheds and open space, or a combination of these. The landowner still owns the land, but sells most or all development rights.

A **working farm easement** is an agricultural conservation easement that includes a farmer ownership and affordability provision. It protects the land as farmland.



Working with a Land Trust

Faith communities with significant land holdings may want to partner with a land trust. Land trusts vary in their scope and approach, but they all operate as nonprofit organizations focused on the protection of natural resources. The first generation of land trusts focused on conservation and protecting open space and natural habitat in areas at high risk of development. Founded in 1980, the Marin Agricultural Land Trust became the first in the US to focus solely on farmland. American Farmland Trust was founded the same year, and worked to get agricultural easements codified in the 1981 Farm Bill. Others, from the Rio Grande Agricultural Land Trust to Agrarian Trust, have followed. Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust is focused on supporting secure, permanent land tenure for BIPOC farmers and land stewards. In the San Francisco Bay Area, Amah Mutsun Land Trust and Sogorea Te' Land Trust support stewardship and access to ancestral lands for spiritual, educational, and traditional land-based practices of Ohlone tribes.

There are numerous models for partnership with land trusts. Some land trusts focus primarily on protecting land with conservation easements or working farm easements, while others provide extensive consulting services and can help you with everything from evaluating your land to managing lease agreements.

WHY PARTNER WITH A LAND TRUST?

You or your faith community own a piece of land that is suitable for farming, but is inconvenient for you to farm or manage. You want to enable others to farm it and/or to permanently protect the land from development.

You have leased a piece of land to an organization or farmer, you believe in their work, and you want to sell it to them at a favorable price and/or protect it for their and other farmers' continued use.

You operate a farm and want to ensure that it remains a farm, accessible to farmers and producing healthy food for neighbors even after you move on.

You or your faith community are committed to reconciliation, reparations, or rematriation, and you want to return land to peoples who were dispossessed from it or who, because of discriminatory practices, have been excluded from land ownership.



WHEN IS A LAND TRUST NOT A GOOD FIT?

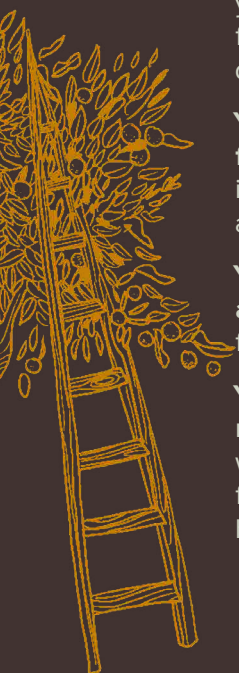
If your faith community owns a piece of farmland fewer than ten acres, land trusts may not have the capacity to partner with you.

If your faith community has deep connections with a BIPOC community, farmer, or other group with whom you wish to work toward justice and regeneration of the land, you may prefer to donate land directly to that organization.

If land is owned by the central governance body of your faith community, your individual congregation may not have the ability to enter into partnerships. However, you can advocate within your organization to highlight forward-thinking about land use. Consider partnering with members of other congregations to build support across the faith organization.

If you are just starting to farm, or just starting to make the land available for farming, it may be too soon to commit the land to farming long term.

If your faith community wants to remain involved with farming activities and education opportunities on the land, you may want to maintain ownership of the property. (In that case, you may still want to consider working with a land trust to place a conservation or working farm easement on the property.)



Protecting Farmland



Between 1992 and 2012, thirty-one million acres of farmland in the US were lost to development.⁴⁶ More land is lost when wealthy buyers turn working farmland into vacation homes. Because of this, many landowners partner with land trusts to protect their land from development, or enact measures to help keep the land in the hands of independent farmers.

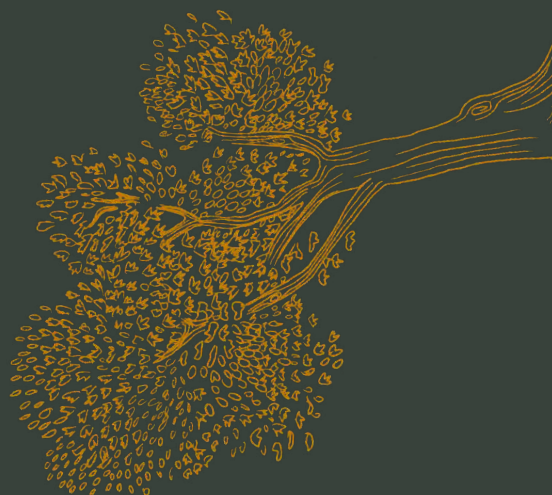
The most common way to protect land is by conservation easement.⁴⁷ A **conservation easement** is a voluntary, binding agreement between a landowner and a land trust or public agency. In donating or selling a conservation easement to a land trust, the owner donates or sells a portion of their property rights, such as the right to subdivide or develop the land. Some conservation easements restrict which parts of the land can be farmed, outlining requirements to protect threatened species or restore waterways. Most limit where and how many new buildings can be constructed on the property.

Landowners who sell easements receive a payment in exchange, but retain ownership of the land.⁴⁸ Landowners who donate easements likewise retain ownership, and the donation qualifies as a charitable donation, generally leading to tax deductions.

Easements allow landowners to continue to own and use their land, and they can also sell it or pass it on to heirs. The conservation easement "runs with the land," meaning that even if the land is inherited or sold, the restrictions stay in place.⁴⁹ The partnering organization, often a land trust, is responsible for ensuring that the agreement is met and that the restrictions are heeded, even after the land changes hands.

The value of easements varies, much as the value of property. For the landowner, transferring certain rights can provide capital for improvements or help lower the purchase price of the land and reduce the property owner's tax burden.

A **working farm easement** is an agricultural conservation easement that includes a farmer ownership and affordability provision.⁵⁰ Under a working farm easement with a preemptive purchase right, the landowner must sell the farm to a qualified farmer at the time of sale. If no farmer is found, or if the sale is proposed at above the agricultural use value of the property, the easement holder—typically a land trust—has the right to step in and purchase the land at its agricultural use value or assign the purchase to a qualified farmer buyer. An agricultural easement can require affirmative farming, meaning farmers must meet the definition of commercial agriculture. Such easements are suited to land that will be farmed productively, not to community gardens.



Considerations for Faith Communities

Faith communities who benefit from tax exemptions may not have financial incentives for donating a piece of land, but putting land in trust remains the best way to ensure that a piece of land remains accessible for farming. For many called by God to farm, or who have found in farming the deepest connection to their spiritual tradition/practice, thinking about the life of the land and future generations is paramount. Without legal protection, no piece of land is safe from the threat of being turned into a parking garage or a warehouse.

For those of any faith who believe that we are all bound together, and so responsible for righting past wrongs to others and to Earth, working with a land trust may help build confidence with historically marginalized peoples. For Indigenous peoples robbed of their lands, leasing sacred territory from a white church or synagogue will not repair the history. Likewise, Black farmers with a family history in sharecropping may worry that a lease agreement will replicate the injustices of that history. Many farmers want the security of land ownership—it is, after all, the loss of land that has enabled the conglomeration of industrial farming. If a land transfer is not immediately possible, consider working with a BIPOC-led and/or equity-driven land trust to provide the long-term security of a ground lease, enter into a cultural use agreement, or protect the land with a working farm easement, as befits the needs of the prospective farmers and stewards.



ON COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS

The majority of land trusts have been white-led and historically have neglected racial and gender equity. But in Black and Indigenous communities, there is a history of protecting the land. Founded to provide a safe haven for Black farmers, the Black-led [New Communities](#) became one of the earliest models for community land trusts in the US.⁵¹ A community land trust is a community-run nonprofit that acquires and manages land parcels in service of a community. Some community land trusts aim to protect affordable housing in areas vulnerable to gentrification; others, like New Communities, focus on self-sufficiency and cultural and rural preservation. The [School of Living](#) advocates the use of the community land trust model for farmer collectives and intentional communities. [Acres of Ancestry and the Black Agrarian Fund](#) also advocate collective work and communal ownership, and are among many calling for a new, commons-centered approach to land ownership.

THE GIFT OF GIVING

O you who believe, you shall give to charity from the good things you earn, and from what we have produced for you from the earth. Do not pick out the bad therein to give away, when you yourselves do not accept it unless your eyes are closed.

—Qur'an 2.267

It is always important to communicate clearly regarding the prospective donation of a piece of land. Accepting an undesirable piece of land can put a farmer at a greater disadvantage than owning no land at all, and it's important that the donors and recipients of any gift understand the implications of taxes and regulations. Those receiving public benefits may be affected by the transfer or donation of a piece of land.

What You Can Do in Partnership with a Land Trust

Donate land to a land trust.

Land trusts focused on agriculture will generally be interested in gifts of farmland or land (such as lawns) that can be converted to farmland without damage to the environment. Some land trusts focus on both conservation and farmland and may accept gifts of woodlands as well as farmlands. Few if any can work with gifts of parcels smaller than ten acres.

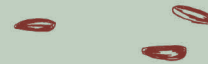


Sell land at less than market value to a land trust (a bargain sale).

A bargain sale can generate needed funds for your faith community while putting land at a price that the land trust can afford. This can support a land trust's efforts to make land available at an affordable price and/or for a longer term for farmers with limited financial resources.

Protect the land with a conservation, working farm, or cultural conservation easement.

A land trust can purchase development rights from you or assist you in partnering with another qualifying conservation agency to protect the land for farming and land-based practices. See more on easements below.



Assign a tribe or group the right to access the land for ceremonial use, cultural education, traditional land-based practices, and/or stewardship and protection.

BIPOC-led land trusts can work with you to develop cultural respect agreements or cultural use permits in partnership with one or more tribes.

Contract a land trust to manage your land.

Some land trusts provide support to develop and oversee conservation plans. Others will additionally manage lease agreements and provide technical support in leasing your land to farmers or farming organizations.



POTENTIAL LAND TRANSFER SCENARIOS

1 Your faith community, or individual members of your community, own(s) under-utilized residential property or other property that is not suitable for farming, traditional land-based practices, or ecological conservation.

a. You could sell the property and donate the proceeds, or a portion of the proceeds, to an organization whose mission you support (such as the nonprofit tribal council for the tribe on whose unceded land the property is located).

b. You could sell the property and donate the proceeds, or a portion of the proceeds, to a local farmer cooperative whose members represent groups who have been systematically excluded from loans and agricultural subsidies.

c. You could sell the property and donate the proceeds, or a portion of the proceeds, to a land trust for the purpose of acquiring land to be made available to farmers (such as Agrarian Trust's capital campaign to purchase Hilliard Farms for long-term lease to the Somali Bantu Community Association in Maine).

EXAMPLE: Having learned that his Mennonite ancestors' settlement in Minnesota occurred just as the Dakota were brutally forced out, John Stoesz decided to donate half his portion of the funds generated from the sale of family property to Indigenous-led organizations working for land justice, including the nonprofit Makoce Ikikcupi. Makoce Ikikcupi is devoted to land recovery for the exiled Dakota, and to land repair for the region and its ecosystems. Read more about [Makoce Ikikcupi here](#).

2 Your faith community owns property that is suited for agriculture or other traditional land-based practices, such as fishing or ceremonial use, and that property is located independently from your place of worship.

a. If the identity of your community is bound to the land, members of your community currently reside there, or your community is considering regenerative uses for the first time, you might not be ready to donate or transfer ownership of the land right away. In this case, consider leasing the land to a farmer or farming organization, or work with a tribe to establish access for their members to engage in traditional land-based practices on the land (a cultural respect easement or agreement).

b. If your community's identity is not bound to this piece of land and you do not have the capacity to manage it, consider donating the land to an organization or a farmer cooperative aligned with your spiritual and ethical goals.



c. If the land is located within the ancestral territory of a tribe, consider donating the land directly to the tribe or a nonprofit organization representing the tribe. Talk with tribal leaders about their vision for the land; it's essential that the tribe take a leading role in the return of land to their people. (Keep in mind that donations to federally recognized tribal nations may not be tax-deductible.)

d. If you are drawn to donating your land, as in the above examples, but cannot afford to do so, consider a conservation or working farm easement. If you first sell development rights to the land, you can then sell the land more affordably, making purchase accessible to a farmer or tribe with limited resources.⁵²

e. If the land is located on a former plantation or was held by slave owners, or if the land was acquired or developed with funds or labor linked to the slavery economy, consider donating the land to Black farmers or a Black-led farming collective.

f. If the property is large (generally fifteen acres or more), you may want to transfer the property to a land trust or contract a land trust to manage long-term lease agreements with farmers. A land trust can also assist in protecting the land for farming.

EXAMPLE: In the San Francisco Bay Area, the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District and the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band entered into a cultural conservation easement that both enables members of the tribe to access their ancestral land on Mount Umunhum and assigns the tribe stewardship responsibilities. The tribe is authorized to engage in numerous activities related to cultural preservation, such as foraging and hosting tribal ceremonies, and is responsible for preserving and protecting the land. Like conventional conservation easements, the cultural conservation easement restricts use of the land to activities that align with conservation goals such as restoration and building gardens, and prohibits subdivision and commercial use. In addition, the easement promotes cultural conservation by prohibiting archaeological excavation unless approved by the tribe.⁵³

3 Your faith community owns property that is suitable for farming or traditional land-based practices, and that property is adjacent to or onsite with your current place of worship, retreat, or residence.

a. If the property is fifteen acres or more, consider donating a portion of the property to a land trust or partnering with a land trust to lease the land to farmers.

b. If the site is located in an urban area or any area threatened by development, consider protecting the land with a conservation easement or a working farm easement. Selling development rights to a land trust or government entity can also provide income, enabling a struggling organization to continue operating.⁵⁴

c. If the property, including buildings and residences, is of historic significance and/or is located in an area where development pressures are high, consider protecting the entire property. Depending on your location, goals, and available funding, you might sell an easement for the entire property to one land trust, or partner with multiple agencies to protect different portions of the property for different purposes.

EXAMPLE: The Dennis Conservation Trust and Native Land Conservancy entered into a cultural respect agreement with the Wampanoag, allowing tribal members access to ancestral land in Cape Cod for spiritual ceremonies and cultural education. The agreement prohibits tribe members from hunting, camping, or foraging without consent.⁵⁵

EXAMPLE: See case study of [Brentwood farms](#).

FINDING A LAND TRUST

American Farmland Trust's [Farmland Protection Directory](#) maps land trusts in many regions of the US.

If there are multiple land trusts in your region, take the time to research them. Explore their past and present projects, and ask people in your networks about their experiences (or if they can introduce you to others who have experience). A land trust that focuses exclusively on conservation will not be the best fit if your goal is to support regenerative agriculture. If your faith community wants to protect land for both conservation and agriculture, a trust focused exclusively on protecting agricultural land may not be the best fit. It is not uncommon for land trusts to work together in protecting and managing a piece of land.



RESOURCES

For a more in-depth look at partnering with a land trust, read [the National Young Farmers Coalition “Finding Farmland: A Farmer’s Guide to Working with Land Trusts.”](#)

For additional ideas and case studies on transferring land for land-based reparations or land return, see [Resource Generation's Land Reparations & Indigenous Solidarity Toolkit](#).

For additional models for cultural access and conservation agreements, [visit First Light](#).

Consult with lawyers, talk to trusted advisors, and build a strong relationship before you partner with a land trust or sell the development rights to your land.



Photos by Inés Ixierda and Sogorea Te' Land Trust.

SOGOREA TE' LAND TRUST

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN

2012

WHERE

Oakland, California

WHAT

an urban Indigenous women-led land trust that facilitates the return of Indigenous land to Indigenous peoples


PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Preservation of ancestral sites; cultural revitalization; cultivation of plants for medicine, food and ceremony; Indigenous tending of land; rematriation and land return

Adapted from Sogorea Te's website in collaboration with
Sogorea Te' Staff

Sogorea Te' Land Trust makes it possible for us to relearn our traditional methods of taking care of the land. We can begin bringing back some of our traditional foods, like acorns. With that comes ways of taking care of the land such as prescribed burning. Burning also helps to bring back some of the native plants that were here before, so that we can bring back the basket weaving, we can bring back the medicines that were always here, we can begin to teach ourselves how it is that we are supposed to live on this land again.

—Corrina
Gould,
cofounder/
director of
Sogorea Te'
Land Trust



Sogorea Te' Land Trust is centered in Huchiuñ, the ancestral homeland of Chochenyo-speaking Lisjan Ohlone people, in what is now known as the East Bay. For hundreds of generations, the Ohlone cultivated reciprocal relationships with the plants and animals we shared this place with and developed beautiful and powerful cultural practices that kept us in balance. We did not own the land, we belonged to it.

Colonization of this land began with the reign of terror inflicted by Spanish soldiers and missionaries who sought to convert all Indigenous people into Catholic subjects of Spain and steal their land. After a brief but harrowing Mexican rancho period, our Ohlone ancestors faced US policies that aimed to eliminate California Indians entirely. In a climate of virulent racial discrimination and state-sponsored vigilante killings, most Lisjan families survived by isolating ourselves and concealing our identities. Our cultural and spiritual traditions were forced into dormancy or secrecy, and much knowledge perished with the passing of generations.



Despite these concerted efforts to erase our history and identity, the Lisjan Ohlone community forms a diverse and vibrant constellation of tribes and families. Utilizing a wide array of survival strategies to navigate a profoundly altered 21st century world, we continue to revitalize our cultural practices and uphold our responsibilities to protect and care for our ancestral homeland.

Today, our tribe remains landless. We are not federally recognized, and the lack of access to traditional ceremonial grounds and to the land we need for housing, food production, and community gatherings is a profound challenge. Of the 473,000 acres in Alameda County, less than five are “owned” by Ohlone people.

SOGOREA TE' Land Trust grew out of a decade-long campaign to stop a construction project in Vallejo, California, which threatened Sogorea Te', a 3,500-year-old Karkin Ohlone village and burial site located at Glen Cove. Corrina Gould and Johnella LaRose worked with dozens of other Indigenous organizers to prevent the city of Vallejo from desecrating and paving over two sacred burial mounds. During a 109-day occupation of Sogorea Te', many urban Indigenous people from the Bay Area and around the country reconnected to the land. We recreated the village, lit a sacred fire and held a healing space with the community. At the end of the occupation, a cultural easement was created. It was the first such easement created in the country between two federally recognized tribes, a city, and a park district. The easement promised to protect the sacred site. But because Ohlone peoples are not federally recognized, we could not officially be part of the cultural easement, and the easement was not ultimately honored in the way that we had envisioned.

Inspired by the connection and community of the occupation, Gould and LaRose created the Sogorea Te' Land Trust as a legal entity through which we can rematriate the land, returning Indigenous land to Indigenous people.

The first piece of land rematriated by Sogorea Te' Land Trust is a traditional village site along the Lisjan Creek in deep East Oakland. In 2016, staff at the nonprofit Planting Justice returned from Standing Rock, where the elders had advised them to go home and support the local Indigenous peoples. An Athabascan woman who worked at Planting Justice introduced the leaders to Gould and LaRose. Inspired by Sogorea Te's vision, they agreed to partner with the land trust to rematriate one quarter acre of land. This quarter acre was symbolically transferred in 2017.

Planting Justice plans to finish paying the mortgage and has committed to subsequently deed the entire two-acre property to Sogorea Te' Land Trust, with a use agreement for Planting Justice to continue operating their nursery on part of the property in perpetuity.

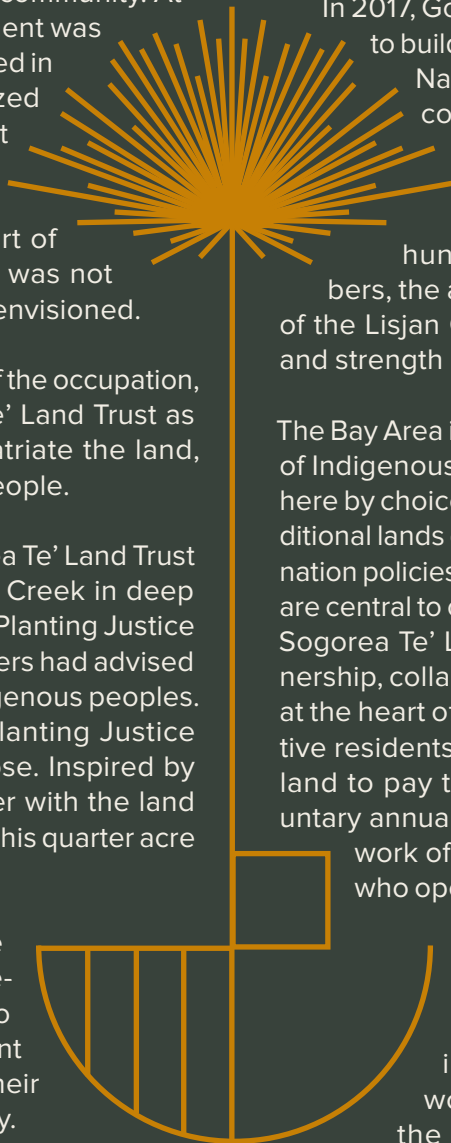
Since 2017, Sogorea Te' has been tending the land at Lisjan. We cultivate traditional and medicinal plants such as sage, tobacco, mugwort, and soap root along with a variety of fruits and vegetables. We make medicines and host community gatherings and ceremonies.

Lisjan is also the location of our first Himmetka emergency response hub. Named with the Chochenyo word for "in one place, together," our Lisjan Himmetka supports community resilience and includes water catchment, filtration, and storage; solar panels and a charging station; first-aid supplies; tools; and a seed saving library.

In 2017, Gould and LaRose had a vision to build the first arbor—a Californian Native ceremonial space—to be constructed in this territory in more than 250 years. Made from sustainably harvested redwoods with the help of hundreds of community members, the arbor is a living embodiment of the Lisjan Ohlone peoples' resistance and strength in the face of colonization.

The Bay Area is home to a diverse diaspora of Indigenous peoples who either moved here by choice or were pushed off their traditional lands during the era of Indian Termination policies. While Lisjan Ohlone women are central to our vision and leadership, the Sogorea Te' Land Trust is intertribal. Partnership, collaboration, and reciprocity are at the heart of our work. We invite non-Native residents of traditional Lisjan Ohlone land to pay the Shuumi Land Tax, a voluntary annual contribution to support our work of rematriation. Organizations who operate here are also invited to

pay Shuumi, a Chochenyo word that means gift. Sogorea Te' creates opportunities for all people living in Lisjan Ohlone territory to work together to re-envision the Bay Area community and what it means to live on Ohlone land.





Photos courtesy of Sister Karen Burke.

Sisters of St. Joseph Brentwood Campus + Peconic Land Trust

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN
2016

WHERE
Brentwood, Long Island

WHAT
twenty-seven acres leased to organic farmers

MISSION/PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES
See Land Ethic statement

The Sisters of St. Joseph are the stewards of a 212-acre campus located in one of the most densely populated (and lowest income) parts of Long Island, New York. In 2015, the Sisters of St. Joseph affirmed a land ethic statement laying out the principles that would guide all future decisions regarding the land they hold in sacred trust for the next generation. Their first step in fulfilling their land ethic was to begin researching options for preserving the land.

Sister Karen Burke and five-other sisters on the planning committee reached out to Peconic Land Trust, which runs a farm incubation program, Farms for the Future, and leases land that it holds to farmers. Peconic conducted a site evaluation, assessing the land, structures, soils, zoning, and surrounding uses, and then created a concept plan in balance with the sisters' Land Ethic statement. Learning that the majority of the Brentwood campus consists of prime agricultural soils, Peconic suggested that they transition some of the land into agriculture, highlighting the need for farmland access on Long Island. With the help of the land trust, they carved out two plots that would be the best acreage.

The trust informed the sisters about a farmland protection program through Suffolk County. The sisters were amazed to learn that the county would pay them to put a working farm easement on the property. The county holds the easement, which requires "affirmative" farming, meaning that the land cannot be left fallow and the farms operating there must meet the commercial definition of a farm. The income from selling the easement was reinvested in the farmland and continues to cover the cost of contracting Peconic to manage lease relationships with farmers.

We knew we didn't want to be the farmers, but we knew we wanted farming on the land.

—Sister Karen Burke



The land hadn't been farmed in 50 years. Peconic put in irrigation wells and planted cover crops to support the transition from lawn to farmland. Then they helped the sisters find farmers. At first, they were not sure how easily they could find farmers in Brentwood, but finding people who want to farm has not been a challenge; Sister Karen keeps a waiting list, which is how she knows she wants to keep doing this and expand the land available.

In 2020, there were seven leasing farmers all farming organically, as stipulated by the sisters and written into their lease agreements. They start with short-term leases, and a handful of beginning farmers have come and gone since the project's inception. There is a risk that new farmers will struggle and give up, but there is also the chance that they will stay and succeed.

Teddy Bolkas of Thera Farms was one of the first to lease from the sisters and leases the largest acreage. Bolkas has built a successful business, running a small CSA and operating a farmstand on the property seven days a week.

The people shopping at the farmstand are neighbors, so farmers like Bolkas have adapted to demand from the local community, which is predominantly Latinx. Bolkas prefers pull marketing, changing what he grows to meet customer demand rather than pushing customers to purchase a niche product. When the Sisters learned that the Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) coupons distributed in the area were going unused, they went through the process of registering so the farmers could accept the coupons, which help low-income women and young children access fresh, local produce. Last year the farms at Brentwood earned twenty-five thousand dollars in sales in those coupons. Some farmers also employ members of the neighborhood community.

I didn't want to grow food in Brentwood and sell it in Manhattan.

—Teddy Bolkas



The sisters are looking at some other pieces of their land that might be put into fruit tree production because there's a demand in the neighborhood for fresh healthy produce, including fruit.

LESSONS/TIPS FOR LANDOWNING FAITH COMMUNITIES

Begin by making the right partnerships.

You don't have to know everything, but you do need to find people who can advise, educate, and guide you.

Build from your partnerships. Learn about the many possible models for protecting and restoring a piece of land.

Consider the many projects underway at Brentwood, all in partnership with Peconic Land Trust and other agencies:

Siting and installation of a solar array that now generates 60 percent of the electricity for the Brentwood campus

Twenty-seven acres of farmland protected with Suffolk County, prioritizing farmland in an increasingly developed area

Forty acres of woodlands in protection with New York state, prioritizing groundwater quality, woods free of deer, and native plants that have become rare on Long Island

Thirty-five acres of open space to be preserved in partnership with one of the sisters' lessees, Long Island Native Plant Initiative, prioritizing native meadow habitat

Welcome farmers and neighbors into the space. Share your plans with leadership and the members of your faith community.

Considering the needs of local residents is part of the sisters' land ethic, but their neighbors are not the only to benefit from the farms. Many of the sisters who live at Brentwood are retired and love the life and energy on the campus.

Articulate your values.

The entire Brentwood campus is zoned for one-acre residential development. The sisters could have sold 40 acres for development and made very good money. Given their location, any land left unprotected or unplanned for would have a high chance of being developed. By articulating their values in a land ethics statement, the Sisters of St. Joseph enabled clear decision-making and charted a path that would align with their deepest values.



G.

FAITHLANDS PROJECTS

STARTING A FARM OR GARDEN

The truth is, a kernel of wheat must be planted in the soil. Unless it dies it will be alone—a single seed. But its death will produce many new kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives.

—John 12:24

Eat from their fruits, and give the due alms on the day of harvest, and do not waste anything.

—Qur'an 6.141

Be patient.

ANCHORING YOUR PROJECT

You might want to start a garden to supply your kitchen with fresh produce or to use a farm to provide your community with organic produce at prices they can afford. If honoring the earth, ecotheology, creation care, or stewardship of the land is central to your spiritual tradition, you may be seeking an opportunity to put that into practice. You might want to use the land for education, whether that means giving members of your community the chance to connect with the soil by raising or picking their own food, starting a summer farm camp for youth, or creating an agricultural training/mentorship program.

Start by bringing together a core group of individuals from your faith community to discuss the goals, intentions, and values of the project.

You probably will not be able to answer all of the following questions up front, but brainstorming will help you hone your goals. Draft a purpose or mission statement that articulates a set of three primary goals or principles that will drive your project. No matter what type of garden or farm you decide to run, it will evolve and grow over time. Establishing clear anchor points will help to guide the project.

What does your **faith community hope to gain** from starting a garden or farm?

What kind of farm or garden is most compatible with your vision and with the land itself? **Does the land fit the vision?**

Do you **envision a community garden powered by volunteers?** Or do you envision a production farm, a commercial business run by an experienced farm manager?

Do you have **a base of committed volunteers?**

Do you have **a base of occasional volunteers** and someone who can coordinate them?

Do you have the **capacity to hire** a full-time farm manager?

What are the **financial goals, capacity, challenges, and implications** for the faith community in pursuing this vision?

Do you plan to **seek outside support such as grants and donations** to support garden/farm operations?

What particular **local needs** will your project fill?

Do you **plan to sell what you raise?** If so, to whom will you sell?

If you're motivated to **increase access to healthy food** in your community, what are your distribution plans?

How can your project **increase equity and collaboration among folks** with diverse identities?

If your community is largely composed of white people, are you considering **ensuring access to the land to BIPOC growers as an act of reparations?** And if so, who can you partner with to do so effectively?

How can your project be **accessible to community members of all abilities?**

Will you seek leaders with diverse identities, including **people of color, women, queer individuals, or people with disabilities?** How will you make people with often marginalized identities feel welcome?

COMMUNITY GARDEN OR PRODUCTION FARM?

The difference between a community garden and a production farm lies somewhere in the matrix between scale and profitability. We differentiate between the two to help you decide which will best serve your vision. However, it is worth remembering that faithlands projects fall along a spectrum, with many encompassing elements of both models.

For instance, a production farm can be defined as a commercial venture that requires a careful profit-loss analysis, but your farm may have a mission-aligned goal to produce food for hunger relief, and thus your “profits” may rely heavily on fundraising as a revenue stream. It is also possible to run a micro-farm business at the scale of a few dozen raised beds. While a garden is defined as focusing on the community benefits of growing food over yields or profit, your garden may produce an abundance of produce and require a careful distribution plan. And while a garden may not focus on generating profit, funds will be needed to support the venture.

Both a garden and a farm require careful tracking of expenses and thoughtful distribution strategies for the harvest. Gardens and farms both have the potential to be vibrant community spaces for education, training, and immersive experiences.

STARTING A COMMUNITY GARDEN

Some community gardens focus on the experience of those tending the garden—creating space for community members to connect with each other, their food, and what the faith tradition has to say about our role as tenders of the soil. Others focus on producing food for folks in need, from members of the faith community to the neighborhood to the extended community. Still others consist of plots where community members can grow their own food.

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Photo courtesy of Howard Allen at Faithfull Farms.

KEY CONCEPTS:

Faithlands are lands owned or leased by a faith community.

A **garden** is a growing space where the focus is more on the community benefits of the growing process than on income or yield.

A **production farm** is an operation dedicated to growing and harvesting crops and/or raising animals for food, where the focus is more on income and yield than in a garden.

Farm or garden education is experiential teaching for children and/or adults that takes place in a garden or on a farm.

A **farmer training program** is a program that offers skill-based learning with specific proficiency outcomes.

A **CSA**, or **community supported agriculture**, is a model where members buy (or commit to buying) a share of the farm’s production before the growing season and receive regular distributions of the farms bounty throughout the season.

A COMMUNITY GARDEN CAN PROVIDE SPACE FOR:

INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTION

Host community work days.

Bring elders and expert gardeners into your youth programming.

Create an after-school or summer garden mentorship program.

CONNECTING THE COMMUNITY TO THE SOURCE OF LIFE

Pray in the garden.

Bring children out to experience the awe of putting seed to soil and harvest to mouth.

Offer blessings of gratitude for healthy plant growth.

USING UNDERUTILIZED RESOURCES TO TEACH A THEOLOGY OF ABUNDANCE

Populate the church kitchen with value added food producers making salsa from the garden's harvest on evenings when the space is not otherwise in use.

Plant sugar snap peas in front of the mosque instead of ornamentals, inviting the community to snack as they pass by.

INCREASING ACCESS TO FRESH FOOD

Offer garden space, seeds, and compost for food insecure families to grow their own produce.

Create a free farm stand.

Donate your harvest to a food pantry or soup kitchen. [Ample Harvest](#) has a site to help growers locate food pantries in their area.

TEACHING COMMUNITY MEMBERS ABOUT THE FOOD SYSTEM, WHERE THEIR FOOD COMES FROM, AND HOW THEY CAN TAKE CHARGE OF THEIR OWN SUSTENANCE

Host farm tours and explain how the lives of your free range chickens are different from those of 99 percent of the chickens that lay eggs in the US.

Collect food scraps for your compost pile after each community meal and help people understand the waste stream.

INTERFAITH OPPORTUNITIES

There has never been a more important time for us to know one another across differences. Sanctuaries of worship can be difficult places to meet each other, but broccoli rows are not.

Invite outside groups to work days or tours. Partner with neighbors to grow food to address food insecurity. Host an interfaith kids garden day where you harvest a salad together.

WORKING WITH VOLUNTEERS

Some volunteers may be master gardeners with very specific ideas about how to approach the project. Others may find it a stretch to physically touch the dirt. The role of a community garden can be to make space for everyone on the spectrum of experience. If you think you will have a complicated network of volunteers, consider designating a specific coordinator to make things run smoothly. Allow volunteers to take as much responsibility as they can while planning carefully for folks who do not spend much time in the garden. The better you prepare for volunteers, the more successful they can be. Sometimes it can be more work to collect the tools, plan the project, and answer emails about timing than it would be to do the garden work yourself, but efficiency isn't always what's most important in a community garden!

RENTAL PLOTS

Members of your community may want to grow their own garden but not have the land base or the ability to invest in tools and infrastructure on their own. Renting out community garden plots can be an efficient way to give gardeners access to the resources they need while building community connections.

Invest in a set of tools, a shed, an irrigation system, a composting site, seedling trays, and maybe a greenhouse. Offer plots to folks whose rental fees can recoup the capital costs and pay for a garden manager's time if needed. Consider facilitating skill shares in the garden or bulk purchasing clubs for seeds or fertilizers.

Designing Your Garden

Your garden will be most successful if it is designed to meet the realities of your site and community. If you are simply buying soil from a local landscape company to fill a few raised beds, you might not need to get too fancy with your design. But the bigger your site, the more you will want to know. Consider determining each of the following:

Hardiness zone: Check the USDA's website and enter your zip code. Your hardiness zone will determine which plants can withstand a winter in your region.

Frost-free dates: When is your average first and last frost of the season? Ask around. Any good gardener in the area will know the answer.

Soil fertility: Submit a soil sample to your local laboratory to determine your percent soil organic matter, pH, and macro- and micronutrient analysis. Don't know what half of those words mean? Someone from the lab or your local land grant university's extension office will likely be happy to walk you through, so just call and don't be embarrassed to ask questions. Don't even know where to send a sample? Just search your region online and "soil test" and you should find the answer.



Soil texture: How clay or sandy is your soil? This will affect drainage and how easily the soil will hold onto nutrients. You can answer this question via a soil sample, and/or by inviting an experienced gardener onto your land to take a look.

Soil contamination: Be sure to test for heavy metals the first time you send it off to a lab. Dangerous contaminants must be avoided via barriers if they are present.

Soil life: Do you have a lot of earthworms? If so, you're in good shape! Look for evidence that the soil is alive with microbes, including a good smell and active root systems diving deep into the horizons of the soil.

Drainage: Does your site puddle up after rain? Next time there is a downpour, go outside a few hours after the sun comes out and check the soil's moisture.

Irrigation source: Where will you get water from and how will you distribute it to plants?

Slope: Google Earth can answer questions about how steep a site is. You can also measure using a string, protractor, and the concepts taught by your middle school math teacher.

Sunlight: There are apps that can help you determine how many hours of sunlight your site gets. You can also use careful observation to determine this by checking the site at different times of day and monitoring how the shade moves.

Pests: You aren't likely to find out how bad your crop pest populations are until you plant. But keep an eye out and ask other gardeners about their challenges.

Non-human neighbors: What critters do you see moving about? Deer, squirrels, groundhogs, voles, and other mammals need to be fenced out or trapped if their populations are large enough to do serious damage.

Human neighbors: Check in with those around you so you are not surprised with complaints. Try to bring folks into the project rather than surprising them with the change.

Once you've collected data about the above factors, sit with a gardening guidebook or one of the many garden design apps and start playing around with ideas.

Will you plant perennials that survive over many years like asparagus, rhubarb, fruit trees, hazelnut bushes, or berries? Will you stick to annual vegetables? What time of year will your labor force be most available? Do you want to plan for abundant harvests at certain times of year? Be sure to follow seasonal and spacing recommendations in seed catalogs and simply start experimenting.

FINDING RESOURCES

No toolkit or handbook can substitute for hands-on inspiration and learning. Find community gardens in your area that are working toward goals similar to yours. Visit gardens that grow crops or use designs under consideration by your community. Talk to growers about what does well in the area and their strategies for responding to local climate and soil conditions.

Find a mentor among the many experienced faith institutions with community gardens, or look for continued learning opportunities. Each state has an extension office at its land grant university with educational resources for gardening in your region, and local programs to increase your gardening skills abound. Master gardeners are often delighted to share their knowledge with others in their community.

Check out these wonderful online resources as well:

[Creating a Faith Based Community Garden](#) by Christine Sine

[Why Every Church Should Have a Garden and How](#) from ARocha

[Resources from The American Community Gardening Association](#)

[Zera'im: Jewish Community Gardening Resource Manual](#) from the Pearlstone Center





STARTING A PRODUCTION FARM

No matter our experience level or personal mythology around the color of our thumbs, each one of us can grow food in a garden. Managing a successful farm business, however, takes a great deal of training. After assessing your goals, site, and resources, you might choose production agriculture. Like a community garden, a production farm can create space for ceremony, connection, and education. Production farming has commercial intent; the operator of the business wants to raise products to sell for income. In this scenario, you will have to decide who will manage the project—in other words, who will be in charge of the farm. One option would be to lease the land to a farmer ([see "Faith-based Land Use Partnerships"](#)). The other option is to hire a farmer who will operate the farm business as an employee.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

A business plan is essential to the success of even the smallest production farm. You will want to determine how the project will be structured (for instance, as an LLC, or a 501c3, or under the umbrella of your institution). The legal structure should follow the purpose and legal and financial considerations appropriate to the project. For instance, a nonprofit farm operates to fulfill a mission, such as helping military veterans recover from post-traumatic stress disorder, and requires a solid fundraising plan. An LLC might be more appropriate if your focus is on yield and distribution. You also need to consider how your tax exempt status as a religious institution will relate to the farm.

Startup costs can range dramatically depending on the type of farm, scale of the operation, and necessary resources. There is payroll to consider, the cost of which will depend on how many employees you will need to manage and operate the farm. Investments in tools, machinery, infrastructure, supplies, insurance, and marketing will need to be made. While a small operation might be able to get by with one hired manager and few expensive outlays like a tractor and refrigeration, scaling up can be both expensive and profitable. The USDA and state departments of agriculture have loans available to help farms get off the ground. Keep in mind that federal grants and loans cannot be used to fund religious worship or instruction; some groups form nonprofit organizations for this reason. Start small!

In addition to understanding what financial resources are required for the project, you will also want to learn about local ordinances dealing with land use and agricultural products.

[See "Understanding Your Land"](#) for an overview of ordinances to be aware of, and keep in mind that it can take time to rebuild soil, grow healthy crops, and start generating revenue.

Include a timeline in your plan, mapping fundraising or investment goals and a target for breaking ground. Keep in mind that farms are not as flexible as other projects. Because of the limitations of planting and harvesting times, delays may push a project back by a full year instead of a couple months. Don't

BRINGING YOUR PRODUCE TO MARKET

A well-researched business plan includes a plan for distribution. Visit local farmers markets, locally sourcing restaurants, natural food stores, and farm stands to find out what sells. Talk with other farmers about their experience, and create your own niche in the local market. Be prepared to respond to local demand.

Direct marketing through CSA programs, farm stands, pick-your-own programs, or farmers markets are excellent distribution strategies if you want to establish a connection with customers and receive the full price for your farm products.

Wholesaling to grocery stores, restaurants, or distribution centers requires less customer service work and marketing, but greater consistency of product and uniform packaging.

Donating what you raise on the farm can sometimes be subsidized through private and public programs or fundraising done by your organization.

Your distribution strategy will be unique to your particular project and should be based on a realistic assessment.



Is there market saturation for a CSA? Do you have enough traffic to make a farm stand work? Do you have enough parking to run a pick-your-own operation? Here are a few examples to get you thinking:

Start a **CSA program** to provide subscribers with regular shares of the harvest in exchange for up-front payment.

Run a **farm stand**.

Hold regular **pick-your-own events**.

Sell at **farmers markets**.

Sell **wholesale** to grocery stores, restaurants, or distribution centers.

Run a **food pantry**, donating to relevant local organizations and/or residents of the neighboring community.

HIRING A FARMER

While the image of a farmer on the cover of a children's board book may be a white man in overalls, farmers come in all shapes, orientations, and shades. Black American farmers stand on a rich history of connection to land and food production. Immigrants from all over the world blend innovative techniques from other places with the systems that surround them in their new homes in Canada and the US. The well of skill, strength, and adaptability is deep among women farmers. As you search for a farmer, remember that the talent pool is deep with growers holding Indigenous, queer, Asian American, and so many other identities.

What to look for

Finding a good match between your faith group and your farmer is essential. Here are some considerations:

What is the job description? What will the employed farmer be responsible for? Who makes what decisions?

Is the farmer experienced? Milking a cow may seem straightforward, but making a living off the land requires a great deal of knowledge. Check your farmer's references. Depending on the scale of your operation, they should have from two to ten years experience.

Can the farmer be a partner in creating a solid business plan? You'll want to get a sense of any candidate's financial literacy. Have they taken a farm business course like those offered by the [ATTRA Sustainable Agriculture Program](#) or through a program like Farm School NYC?

Does their understanding of running a business fit with yours? Is their vision clear? Have they or are they willing to research local markets?

Do the farmer's salary/wage requirements fit your organization's budget? You can get a sense of farm wages in the area by researching comparable positions. Some farmers will consider payment perks offered by an organization to supplement their income, like housing, use of a vehicle and/or gas account, use of a phone or internet, and access to fresh vegetables and other products from the farm.

Can the farmer put together a risk management plan? What if the farmer gets injured or sick? What if the tractor breaks or a hail storm takes out all of the farm's spring seedlings? Securing financial reserves and backup labor are crucial steps to make sure the farm can continue operating. You or your farm manager should research crop insurance options, although these can be slim for diversified farms. The USDA's Whole Farm Revenue Protection Program is the best option for small farms but falls short of meeting the needs of many.

Is the farmer aware of food safety standards? Farms of a certain scale are required to comply with food safety regulations set out in the Food Safety Modernization Act. Your farmer should at least be aware of whether or not the farm would be required to comply and, if not, should still have a food safety plan that is in line with compliance to protect you from liability and to protect customers from potential contamination.

Does the farmer understand your goals and the culture of your community? Spend enough time with prospective farmers to make sure they truly understand the needs and complexities of your site and community. A farmer hoping to run a CSA will not fit well if your primary goal is to donate produce to your next-door food pantry.



Does your community understand the goals and culture of your prospective farm manager? If you want to provide an opportunity for farmer(s) from groups historically marginalized from land access and farming, invest time to engage your community and ensure that the community can respectfully support the farmer and honor their culture, beliefs, and lived experience.

Will the farmer's communication style be compatible with the style and needs of your group? Challenging situations inevitably arise on a farm. Imagine that an old well on the land breaks mid-season during a drought and the farmer must present an urgent need for several thousand dollars to church leadership. Or perhaps the mosque's neighbors are complaining about the sight of rotting food waste in compost piles. How will the farmer communicate in these moments?

Is the farmer flexible? Will they be able to reassess and adapt based on what is most successful?

Where to look

Find farmer profiles and/or advertise your search on your state's Farm Link program(s). Regional land link opportunities can be located using the [National Young Farmers Coalition's Land Link Directory](#) or [American Farmland Trust's Farm Link Directory](#).

Advertise your search on social media.

Reach out to local organizations with a connection to farming and ecology, such as land trusts and farmer mentorship programs.

Visit farmers markets and talk to farmers about your search.

Network at conferences and other gatherings.

What formal agreements to draw up

Work contract

Plan for supervision: Determine how much freedom the farm director/manager will have in decision-making for the farm and who from the faith community will "supervise" or be the farmer's primary point of contact.

This may also include a plan for passing along institutional knowledge if there are leadership changes in your community.

Business plan and/or farm budget

Conservation plan and/or land management plan ([See "Earth Care" for more on land management plans.](#))

Formal agreements with any partners, such as a distribution plan

Any documents needed for local ordinances

FINDING RESOURCES

Sign up for newsletters and listservs from extension agents to learn about upcoming training in your area. Extension agents typically work with land grant universities; the [Land Grant University Website Directory](#) can help you locate those nearest to you.

The [National Young Farmers Coalition](#) offers tips and support to young farmers, including [a listing of farmer training programs around the country](#).

[Black Church Food Security Network](#) hosts a Black farmer directory and assists churches in starting or expanding agricultural ventures.

The [Greenhorns](#) offers numerous resources for aspiring and experienced farmers.



WHO, WHAT, HOW, WHEN?

DESIGNING YOUR GARDEN OR FARM

The goals you have set to anchor your project will help you answer the following questions. Those answers can help you determine where on the spectrum of garden to farm your project will fall.

WHO WILL DO THE FOLLOWING—IS IT A DEDICATED GROUP OF VOLUNTEERS, A FARM MANAGER, OR FARM MINISTRY?

Come up with a **farm design**

Write a **budget**

Manage day-to-day logistics, like scheduling and supervising volunteers, renting out garden plots, and knowing when the lettuce is ready for harvest

Perform the **necessary labor**, from fixing the fence and bunching the beets to turning the compost and pruning the orchard

A small permaculture-inspired **polyculture food forest**

One hundred acres of wheat

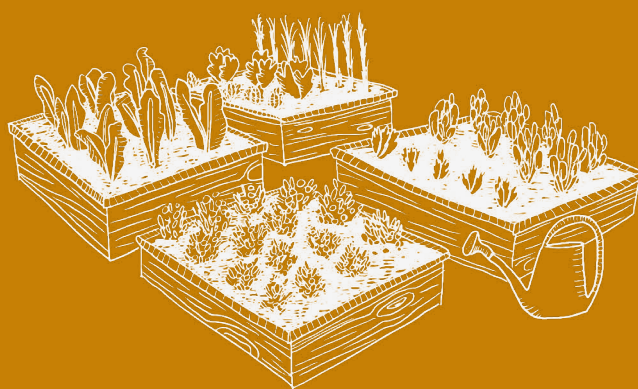
Backyard raised beds that grow cherry tomatoes and snap peas for children's programming

A **five-acre diversified production farm** that sells baskets of strawberries, five-pound pumpkins and everything in between at a farmers market

Plots rented out to gardeners who have access to shared tools and resources

A **volunteer-powered** community vegetable garden

HOW WILL YOU DESIGN YOUR GARDEN OR FARM?



WHAT WILL YOUR BUSINESS MODEL BE?

An **income-generating business** owned by the faith community and run by a farm manager

An **educational garden** with enough hand tools and wheelbarrows to support large volunteer groups

A farm business owned and run by a professional farmer with a long-term land lease from your faith institution (For more about leasing, see the section on "[Faith-based Land Use Partnerships](#)").

Plan **community gatherings** to seek early input and generate excitement about your project

Reach out to groups your project aims to support

Invite a community member to teach cooking classes using greens and grains raised on your farm

Ensure that your plan is **equitable and beneficial** to the neighborhood as a whole

WHAT COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING WILL BE PART OF YOUR MISSION?

WHAT CROPS OR LIVE-STOCK WILL YOU RAISE?



A diverse selection of garden vegetables and flowers that attract native pollinators

Tomatoes, tomatillos, cilantro, onions, garlic, and peppers, so that you can have community events to make salsa

Rotationally grazed goats that control weeds like poison ivy, such as those used ritually on Eid Al-Adha

The Three Sisters—corn, beans, and squash—to **honor the traditional companion planting of many Indigenous farmers** and support climate resilience

Greenhouses

Barn

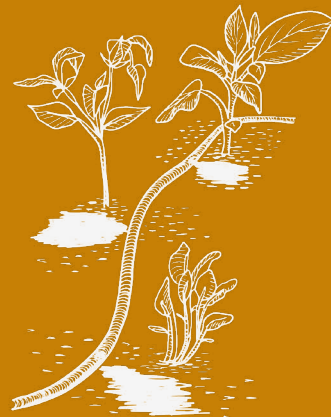
Electricity

Wells or municipal water connections

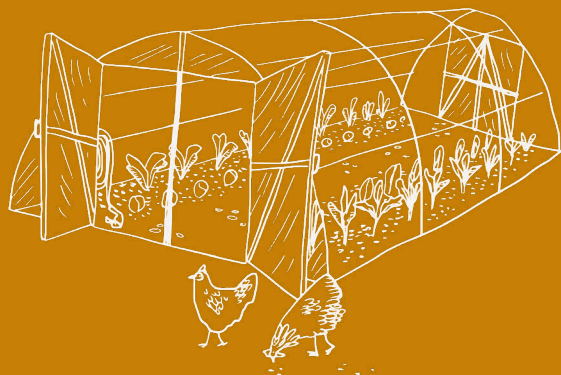
Safe water sources for use in washing or watering food crops

Installation of drip lines or overhead sprinklers setups for irrigation

WHAT INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS TO BE BUILT?



WHAT TOOLS NEED TO BE PURCHASED?



Tractors
Hand tools
Seed starting trays
Shovels
Grow lights
Wheelbarrow

Community meals at your faith institution


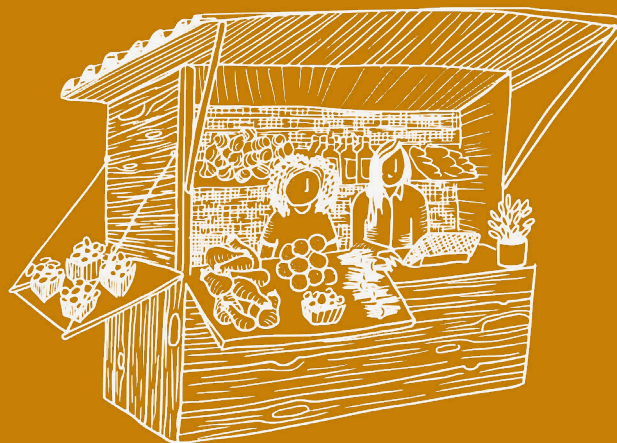
Food pantries or other **emergency food distribution centers**

CSA programs

Farmers market customers and/or farmstand

Wholesale accounts

WHAT DISTRIBUTION OUTLETS WILL YOU PURSUE?



Instead of harvesting fruits and vegetables to sell at markets or donate to food pantries, Abundance Farm holds “Pick Your Own” two days a week. Pick-your-own is a modern-day interpretation of Peah, the ancient Jewish agricultural justice laws on how to share and redistribute food. Often those who come to pick food grew up on farms or come from agricultural backgrounds around the world, and just as often people come who have never picked food from the earth before.

Over time, people gain enough confidence to come pick what they need outside of formal pick-your-own hours. That fulfills the farm’s mission: to make it feel, for members of the community, as though this food already belongs to them. It’s not a matter of charity, of givers and takers, but of a balanced, healthy community.



Photo courtesy of Hisham Moharram.

GOOD TREE FARM

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN
2007

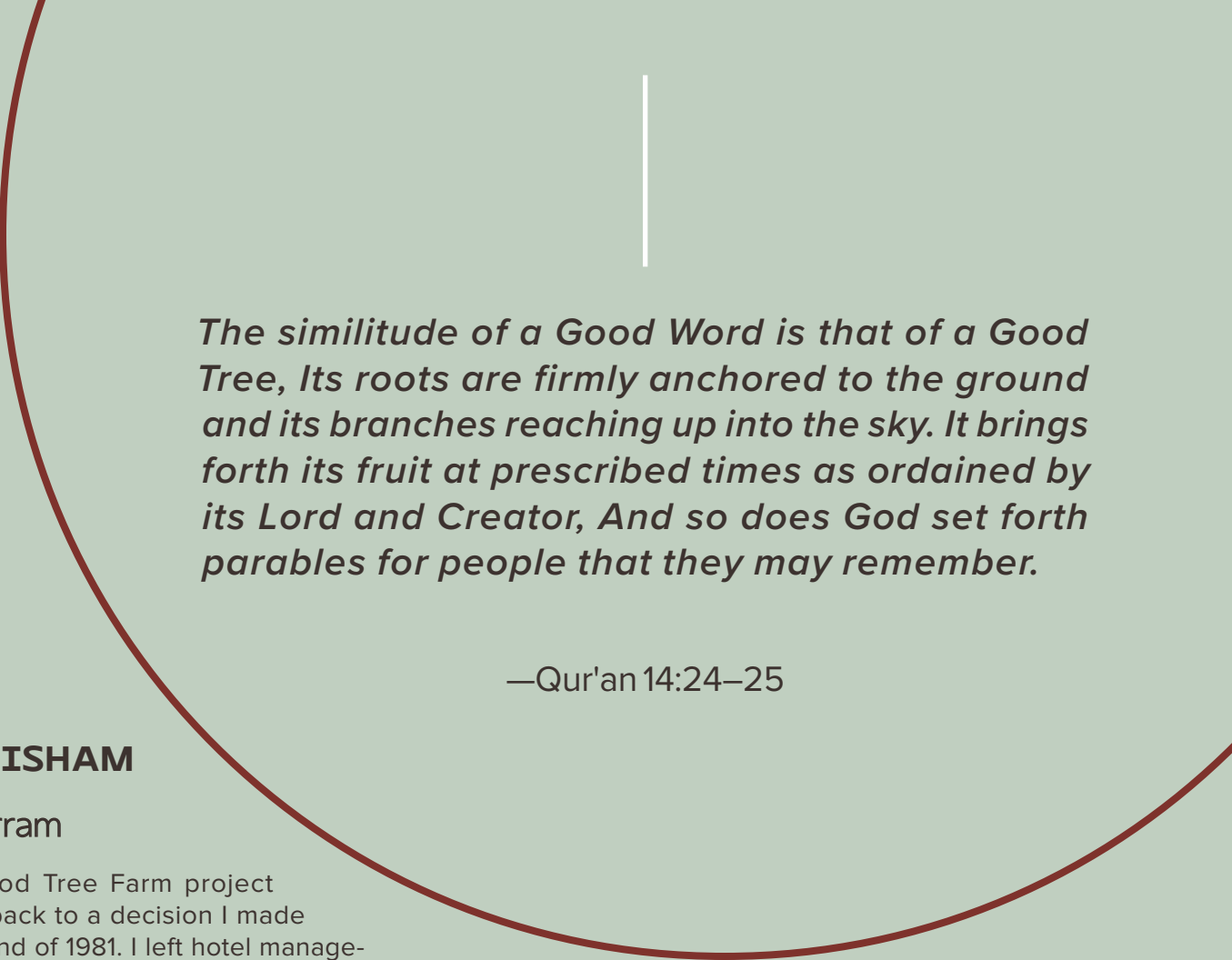

WHERE
New Egypt, New Jersey

WHAT

organic production farm and value-added production with work-to-own option for individual and nonprofit farmer-partners

MISSION/PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Ethical farming; food security/sovereignty; social justice rooted in education and a vision of shared ownership



The similitude of a Good Word is that of a Good Tree, Its roots are firmly anchored to the ground and its branches reaching up into the sky. It brings forth its fruit at prescribed times as ordained by its Lord and Creator, And so does God set forth parables for people that they may remember.

—Qur'an 14:24–25

DR. HISHAM

Moharram

The Good Tree Farm project traces back to a decision I made at the end of 1981. I left hotel management as a major and switched to agriculture. I wanted an occupation that could fulfill my mission as a Muslim: helping the oppressed and subjugated break the chains of their servitude to those who exploit them.

In mid-2006, I pitched the idea of an organic farm to members of the central New Jersey Muslim community and got just under 10 percent buy-in; 26 investors invested close to \$540,000. The plan was to take five to seven years to complete the start-up phase, during which we would grow and sell edible crops—leafy greens, root crops, fruit crops, herbs, and spices—and complete the infrastructure we would need to produce value-added products, like essential oils. Then, in the eighth year, we would shift our production to value-added products from aromatic and medicinal plants.

What does Islam have to do with this? Everything. My understanding of Islam is that we each have to live to uphold justice and to call people to acknowledge their creator's favor upon them. I sought to use my skills and education to address the wrongs of modern and commercial agriculture. When greed and the capitalist ethos of "the bottom line" drive our actions, investments, and career choices, everyone and everything pays a heavy price. We all have an obligation to heal people and planet. I believe that Islam calls on every Muslim to find strategic partners in the effort to do good and forbid or prohibit evil.

That is why I became a Greenfaith Fellow in 2011, and continue to seek out inter-faith partnerships while working to make healthy organic food affordable to the poor in our community. Islam also requires us to empower the weak, and that is why I have created ownership opportunities for youth from marginalized minorities and offer them alternative careers through an entrepreneurship incubator.

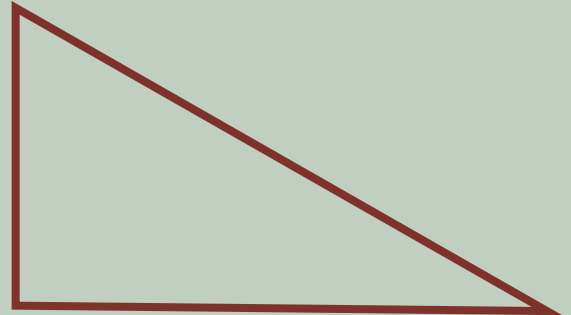
In 2012, I formed a nonprofit, The Good Tree, Inc., to teach, empower, educate, and advocate and support regenerative, sustainable, and organic agriculture. The nonprofit business structure is the best vessel through which we can do that. I also wanted to vest my accumulated knowledge and experience with a structure that would protect it and use it to continue to do good after I die, and the non-profit structure serves that purpose by owning the intellectual property rights to the business plan.



At Good Tree Farm, aspiring farmers can acquire ownership shares in the farm in exchange for work hours. The goal is not simply to give land or ownership away, but to create apprenticeship and ownership opportunities for socioeconomically disadvantaged youth and faith groups. To encourage individuals and organizations to participate and become part owners, we have advertised the work-to-own opportunity and given explanatory presentations to organizational representatives.

So far, two individuals and two nonprofit organizations have entered the ownership program. The two organizations that became part-owners are a Muslim initiated free-clinic associated with a Muslim community in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and an Islamic Society in Willingboro, New Jersey. Both organizations became invested part-owners through personal contact with their official representatives. The two individuals who became invested are committed to the values and the objectives of the project and completed their work hours for ownership share requirements. As individuals, they represent different demographics of strategic partners within our community.

In the 12 years since Good Tree Farm was founded, there have been ups and downs, with seasons of profit and seasons of loss. Due to extreme weather, numerous farming disasters have been declared in the state of New Jersey, but small organic farms are not able to tap into disaster relief funding. In profitable years, profits have been reinvested in the farm's infrastructure. The team is now working on infrastructure for value-added products. By the end of 2021, we hope to complete eight guest rooms for hosting interns and apprentices, a 3.6 kilowatt solar system to power housing, irrigation pumps, and guest housing facilities, and a perishable crops post-harvest handling shed. We also hope to establish an essential oils extraction lab, a personal care products lab, and a poultry processing facility, all using shipping container construction techniques. Funding is the only thing delaying earlier completion of these projects. Only due to living within our means and avoiding debt is the Good Tree Farm Project still here today despite the financial crisis and all the other hardships we have experienced.



We have also started to use our assets as leverage to encourage other communities to work together to establish Good Tree Farms in their locations. Instead of selling 55 acres to take advantage of the increased value of the farm property, we hope to inspire others to start their own farms, using the same model for shared ownership. It is my hope to leave behind a network of Good Tree Farms, all majority-locally owned and each co-owning in all the other properties as well, with the ownership in the hands of small impact investors, youth, single mothers and marginalized and disenfranchised racial, religious, and cultural groups who care about their impact on people and planet.





Photos courtesy of Plainsong Farm.

PLAINSONG FARM AND MINISTRY

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN
2015

WHERE
Rockford, Michigan

WHAT
a nonprofit production farm and ministry with resident farm managers

MISSION/PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES
To restore connections between people, places, and God through regenerative agricultural practices, immersive farm-based experiences, and national leadership initiatives

REVEREND

Nurya Parish

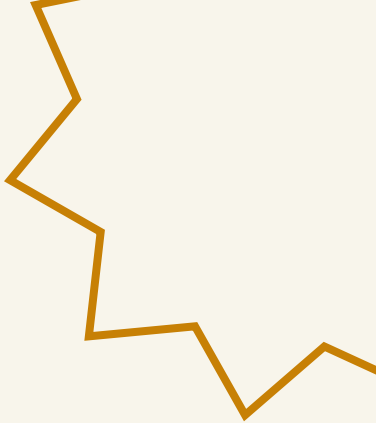
Plainsong Farm, a faith-based nonprofit educational and CSA farm in west Michigan, began when I met Mike and Bethany Edwardson in October 2014. We were introduced by a mutual friend who knew only two things: one, I was a priest in the Episcopal Church whom

God had called to start a farm-based ministry and who owned the property to make that possible; two, they were aspiring farmers who had set a goal to start a farm connected with the church.

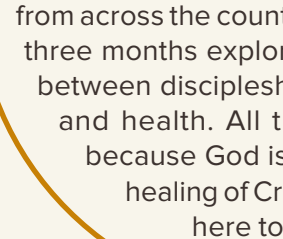
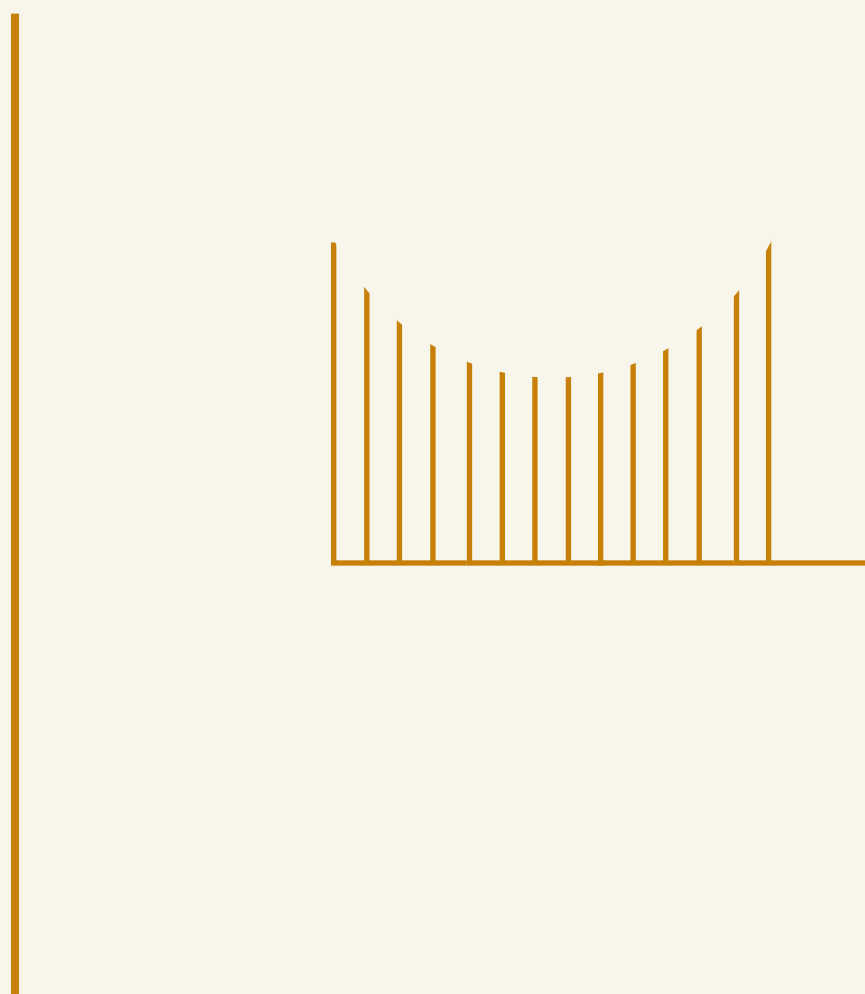
All of us shared a sense that we were called to live in the tension between organized religion and small scale agriculture. The Gen-Xer in the mix, I have been interested in food systems since the late 1990s. I felt alienated around other religious leaders because of my interest in questions about food and farming. The Edwardsons were active at their Christian college and at their church, growing vegetables in gardens they made and tended, and they had also encountered Christians who didn't think that growing food to support the health of land and humans counted as real ministry. The tension between organized Christianity and small-scale agriculture didn't make sense to any of us; we thought these should go together. Our goal when we began was to start a farm where this idea could become reality.



Despite the fact that the worlds of small-scale agriculture and organized Christianity had little mutual understanding, we could only turn to the resources of each to begin. The small-scale agriculture world told us to start a for-profit farm and keep the nonprofit work separate under the tax-exempt status of a religious organization. Organized Christianity listened to us speak about teaching care of Creation and discipleship while providing food for the poor, and agreed that we could collect and expend funds for these purposes using the diocese's tax exempt status. God called me, and my husband had agreed, to provide use of our family's first home—three bedrooms, one bathroom, ten acres, two barns—on a rent-free basis. Plainsong Farm and Ministry began with that property, three volunteer cofounders, fifteen thousand dollars for a BCS tiller, a CSA farm under a for-profit corporation, and a few donations from trusting individuals. This was in 2015 and 2016, and none of us knew when we would be paid or for how much. The Edwardsons tried many enterprises on a small scale all at once: small-scale vegetables on a CSA model, broilers, layers, pigs, and turkeys. It was action research to understand what was the best fit for themselves and the property. They settled on small-scale vegetables grown using organic methods and sold on a CSA model as the best fit for the property. This became the core of the farm operation.



At the end of 2016, we ran all the numbers at a small-scale agriculture “Fearless Farm Finances” workshop and decided we had to eliminate the friction of two enterprises, one of which was for-profit and one of which was nonprofit. By then we had a commitment of twenty thousand dollars over three years from the Episcopal Church, and a few more donors. The Edwardsons cared for property and product, we both provided occasional programs, and I focused on building nonprofit infrastructure: a board, bylaws, tax-exempt status, incorporation, donor development. In 2017, we added another founder to our team, Polly Hewitt, who traveled with us to Adamah Farm in Connecticut on a research trip and fell in love with the vision of a farm that grew young adult disciples along with vegetables. She became pivotal to our bylaw development, communications strategies, and seasonal worship services, helping us grow into practices of nonprofit life.



We’re still a young organization, just about five years old. In 2019, we dug deep and restated our mission: to restore connections between people, places and God through regenerative agricultural practices, immersive experiences on the farm, and national leadership initiatives. The farm continues to grow food for people. In partnership with our watershed agency and soil conservation district, we are an environmental education site and a demonstration site for conservation practices. Farm-based experiences and national leadership initiatives grow people for the glory of God and the healing of Creation. Seasonal outdoor all-ages worship draws people from across our region; our summer fellowship brings young adults from across the country who live with us for three months exploring the connections between discipleship, ecology, justice, and health. All this was possible because God is at work for the healing of Creation. We’re here to help.



Photo courtesy of Little Portion Farm.

LITTLE PORTION FARM

a program of the Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Office of the Our Lady of the Angels Province of Franciscan Friars Conventual

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN
2017

WHERE
Ellicott City, Maryland


WHAT

organic production farm growing food for the hot meal program at the Franciscan Center in Baltimore

MISSION/PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES

To provide fresh, local, organic produce for food-insecure citizens; farming with sustainable, regenerative methods that heal and strengthen ecosystems; education in service of the institutional changes needed to remedy the root causes of injustice

Based on interviews with Friar Michael Lasky, Joseph Hamilton, and Matt Jones



I was very intimidated by the blank slate that was the farm when I started, but in some ways it was also appealing to be there at the beginning.

—Matt Jones, farm outreach coordinator

We wanted a teacher who liked getting his hands dirty, not a farmer who could teach.

—Friar Michael Lasky

For many years, the 85 acres of land held by the Our Lady of the Angels Province of Franciscan Friars Conventual was farmed by incoming friars. Working the land was part of their initiation. In the mid-twentieth century, the site stopped serving as a novitiate for novice friars, and they began leasing the land to a tenant farmer. In the 2000s, when the friars and staff became involved with the Baltimore Food and Faith Project and deepened their understanding of the industrial food system, they realized that in addition to damaging the soil with chemicals and fossil fuels, the farmer was growing commodity crops to produce unhealthy food additives like corn syrup and hydrogenated soybean oil. Meanwhile, more than 750,000 Marylanders were living without consistent access to nutritious food.

Under the leadership of Friar Michael Lasky, the friars established a mission to heal the soil and use the land to feed people—to once again make land stewardship and understanding food central to the Franciscan brotherhood.

They converted 82 depleted acres to an organic pasture for cows and sheep, now leased to an organic farmer in the area. Aid from USDA grants supported converting the cropland to pasture. And with income from the ten-year lease—the minimum time needed for the farmer to invest in restoration—taxes on the agricultural land are covered.

That farmer has also served as a valued advisor to Little Portion Farm (LPF), the heart of the ministry. LPF is a friar-led three-acre parcel devoted exclusively to growing organic food for the hot meal program at the Franciscan Center in Baltimore, which feeds seven hundred of the city's most vulnerable, food insecure men, women, and children, 365 days a year.

In 2019, Little Portion Farm grew its first crops, producing 3,136 pounds of vegetables on a quarter acre. During 2020, a year of profound economic struggle for many, the farm expanded to three quarter acres of production and was able to serve a nearly two-fold increase in demand for fresh food. With the help of volunteers who worked some 4000 hours, they harvested nearly 20,000 pounds of food. Over the next three years, the farm plans to increase its land under cultivation to maximize production on its full three acres.

FINDING A FARM MANAGER

After two years of cover cropping to build soil and prepare Little Portion Farm for planting, the friars sought a farm outreach coordinator—someone who would manage the farm and also serve as a farm educator.

Prior to a meeting of a Catholic working group for climate advocacy, Friar Mike mentioned this open position to those who were present, piquing the interest of Matt Jones, who was working as an environmental policy advisor for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Matt had worked in an agricultural setting as an Americorps volunteer, and loved being outside and working with his hands—but his farm experience was limited. Still, drawn to the more tangible work of agriculture and to using food as a gateway to social justice and caring for the earth, he reached out to share his interest. Convinced Matt was the right person, Friar Mike assured him that he could develop agricultural skills in time (and said his prayers). Matt joined LPF early in 2019, when the farm raised its first crops.

Matt oversees the day-to-day activities of planning, growing, and harvesting food as well as coordinating needs of and delivery to the Franciscan Center. He also develops and directs a growing volunteer corps to work the farm. In its first year of production, 1,143 volunteer hours were donated to Little Portion Farm. Mentorship from the permaculture farmer who leases the friars' other 82 acres has helped Matt succeed in this role, as has the confluence of his experience, including teaching and a master's degree in religion and ecology.

In addition to managing the farm and the distribution of food, Matt and Friar Mike provide education on site, hosting college students for service learning on food justice, mentoring students on soil health, and hosting visits for service work from Catholic middle and high schools. Part of the ministry of the farm has been to raise awareness of the causes and repercussions of urban poverty, from systemic segregation to food insecurity, and to advocate for food and climate justice.

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H.

FAITH-BASED LAND USE PARTNERSHIPS

LEASING TO A FARMER

Agrarian life is the practical interface between nature and culture.

—Norman Wirzba

First, come to a consensus. Second, get it in writing. Third, don't make yourself vulnerable between those two!

—Eva Moss, Farm Commons

Leasing land to a farmer or farmers can benefit your organization and community—as a source of income and healthy food, as a means of healing the land, as a tangible local connection to food and land. And it can make farming a viable reality for beginning, disadvantaged, or other farmers for whom access to land is a major challenge.

A LEASE IS A LEGAL CONTRACT.

It is also a relationship. In fact, success depends far more on shared values and good communication between the landowner and the farmer than the fine print in a document. It is always advised to have the agreement in writing, although “handshake” leases can hold up in court.

The lease is an opportunity to articulate your faith community's goals alongside those of the farmer.

A well-designed lease is a powerful tool. It makes clear and fair the roles, responsibilities, privileges, and conditions of use. It sets forth procedures for checking in and working things out. The parties work out the terms before they sign the document, and they can later modify the terms of their lease if needed. Some farm leases fit on one page; others run many pages with multiple attachments.

One of the most common complaints from farming tenants is that their landlords don't understand farming. Talk with other farm landlords, visit farms in the area, read about farming or talk to Extension program educators to appreciate farming realities and reflect them in your lease document. (For example, you may choose to build in some flexibility on rental payments to accommodate a delayed harvest due to weather, resulting in a cash flow dilemma for the farmer.) Check with a land grant university, Farm Bureau, and other farm support organizations, especially farmer training programs, to learn more about farming and farmers.

TYPES OF LEASES

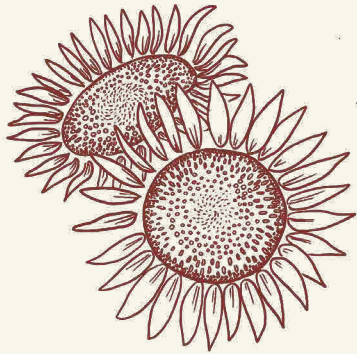
Leases reflect a particular arrangement between landowner and land user. In that sense, every farm lease is unique, but there are several basic categories of leases.

The majority of farm leases are **SHORT-TERM LEASES** that last one to three years. While short-term leases don't offer a lot of security, they may work for both parties. Some landowners favor short-term leases because they want flexibility in how their land is used and are unwilling to tie it up for long periods of time. A short-term lease is often a good place for both parties to start. Short-term leases allow the parties to decide whether a longer-term arrangement would be beneficial. However, with a short-term lease, farmers are less inclined to invest in a parcel or to engage in longer-term practices such as soil building, rotations, or conservation

A **LONG-TERM LEASE** can last from five to ninety-nine years and gives both parties security to build the relationship and share in long-term care of the land. It enables a farmer to invest in the property (provided the lease allows it), grow the farm business, develop stable markets, and become connected to the site and the surrounding community. A long-term lease can allow for changes to its terms and permit early termination by the farmer, and, under certain circumstances, the landlord.

In a **GROUND LEASE**, a tenant rents the land and owns the improvements on it. For example, a farmer rents fifty acres and buys (or builds) a house and barn that she owns on the property. This makes the acquisition more affordable for the farmer: she is not purchasing the land. The tenant has equity in the improvements and can sell these assets to the next tenant or back to the landlord, depending on the terms of the lease. Often the sale is subject to affordability provisions so the improvement remains affordable to the next tenant. A ground lease is common in the commercial real estate world. Though less common in agriculture, this model is becoming more attractive, particularly among conservation organizations and institutional landowners.

A LEASE CAN LEAD TO PURCHASE. The two methods for this path are a purchase option or right of first refusal. Either mechanism can be built into a lease or be separate legal agreements. This path to ownership is especially attractive to farmers who need time and business success to acquire the means to purchase their farm. As with all these transactions, consultation with a knowledgeable attorney is advised.



Sogorea Te' Land Trust focuses on rematriation and land return on Lisjan Ohlone land in what is now the Bay Area in California. In 2018, they assumed a ninety-nine-year lease with the Northern California Land Trust on an urban garden in West Oakland, named Rammay (west in Chochenyo), where they raise twelve different varieties of fruit trees and bushes, seasonal vegetables, and traditional and medicinal plants such as mugwort and soap root.

The lease had originally been negotiated with another party, and when Sogorea Te' took it over, they kept almost all of the original terms, making one important

modification: two houses on the land parcel share water access with the garden, so the terms for paying the water utility were updated to reflect all parties' usage. The land trust also actively tends several other land sites throughout the East Bay.

ELEMENTS OF A GOOD LEASE

Depending on the circumstances, a good lease may include a bit more detail.

A legal contract requires the parties (landlord and tenant, sometimes referred to as lessor and lessee), premises, term, "consideration," and signatures be provided.

THE PREMISES. The description of the property should sufficiently identify the location and its boundaries, ideally with a map. A statement describing the initial condition of the premises including buildings and other improvements may be included here. If a residence is included, special requirements may apply, such as passing inspections.

THE TERM. The term is specified by its start and end dates. Some states limit the length of a farm lease term. A rolling lease term automatically renews each year. For example, a rolling five-year lease will renew annually for another five years, so that at the beginning of each year the tenant knows that they have at least five years to continue farming the parcel.

THE RENT. Payment must be specified. There are several ways to calculate and pay rent. It can be paid in cash, products, or services. For example, a tenant can perform property management tasks separate from farming. The value of this labor must be determined. Sometimes buildings and machinery are also rented. Both parties should report rent payments for tax purposes.

TAXES AND UTILITIES. The party responsible for payments should be specified. It is easier to determine responsibility if the utility is metered directly to the leasehold. The tenant would be responsible for the electric bill attached to a leased barn, for example. Water for farming could have a designated and metered line. If that is not possible, it is good practice to estimate water use and assign payment accordingly.

PERMITTED AND PROHIBITED USES. The lease should clearly define the permitted and prohibited uses of the property and specify to what extent the tenant's right to the property is exclusive. If public access is allowed over certain areas for educational tours, for instance, this should be addressed in the lease. The lease should also address what will be considered "agricultural" use; a lease may prohibit aquaculture or commercial composting, or permit an annual corn maze or a year-round farm stand.

This section lays out limitations that could, for example, prohibit livestock, cropping on highly erodible land, or removing gravel or topsoil. It may be important to specify where structures or farm machinery may be used, especially if appearance is a concern. It is important for the landlord to strike the right balance between their preferences and requirements for the land, and the attractiveness of the agreement to the farmer. The more prohibitions there are, the more burdensome the lease might be to a tenant who wants maximum flexibility to farm.

MAINTENANCE AND REPAIRS. Repairs and maintenance are fertile ground for disagreements and disappointments between a landowner and farm tenant. The lease should specify who is responsible for maintaining and making repairs to the land and any structures that are included in the lease, such as fences, buildings, storage structures, roads, and irrigation systems. In addition, the lease should state who is responsible for keeping the premises in a clean and safe condition.

In practice and in common law, the tenant is usually responsible for the expenses and labor associated with repairs that do not require skilled labor and the routine maintenance needed to prevent the deterioration of the facilities. The landlord is usually responsible for major repairs such as roofing, heating systems, siding, and structural components.

TERMINATION, RENEWAL AND DEFAULT. The lease should state the manner and time in which notice of lease termination by either party must be given. Often the option to renew is given to the tenant. Note that a five-year lease in which the landlord can terminate at any time does not give the tenant five years of security.

Notice of termination procedures must comply with any applicable state law. Default means that one of the parties has violated a term in the lease by failing to do something required or by doing something not permitted. The lease should specify what constitutes default by either the tenant or the landowner, along with procedures to remedy the default.

INSURANCE AND LIABILITY. Typical farm leases require the tenant to carry liability insurance, naming the landowner as co-insured. The landlord usually carries casualty insurance on the leased property. See Land for Good's [Liability and Insurance in a Farm Lease](#) for more.

COMMUNICATIONS AND DISPUTE RESOLUTION. A lease may also describe how parties should seek permissions and settle disagreements. Approaches include a shared commitment to negotiate differences at regular meetings between the parties, a facilitated conflict resolution process, or formal mediation or arbitration. The lease should specify what needs to be in writing as well as timeframes for decisions.

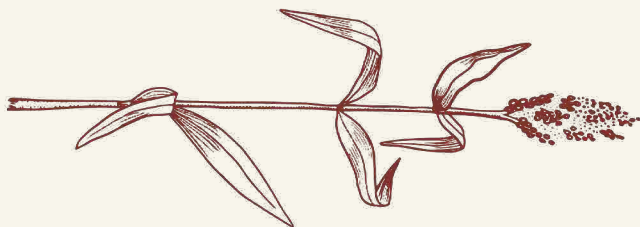
CONSERVATION AND LAND MANAGEMENT PLANS. A lease can outline general goals and principles for stewardship, sometimes as part of a broader management plan for the land. A principle might be to promote biodiversity. A goal might be to control invasive species. Keep in mind that while farmers may be totally aligned with a landlord's stewardship principles, most prefer autonomy and flexibility around how they farm. A good framework is for the landlord and the farmer to agree on general principles and goals, and leave it to the farmer to decide how to achieve them. For more on land management plans, [see "Earth Care"](#).

FINDING YOUR FARMER

Finding a farming tenant involves several steps and considerations. No search is involved if a landlord wants to rent their land to a nearby farmer for an annual hay crop, and the rental agreement is simple and straightforward. If you envision a farming family living on your land with long-term security, or want to make the land available to a group such as a justice-focused farming collective, there's more to it. In addition to the technical and legal aspects, sometimes cultural factors are significant. A faith community in a rural setting that invites a tenant from a different background or locale (for example, a queer farmer or an urban farmer of color) will improve the odds of success by fostering awareness and sensitivity among neighbors and local leaders. It can be a real opportunity to grow community appreciation for issues around racism, diversity, and inequity.

Know what you want, what you have to offer, and what's essential to have in your agreement. Check with your attorney and financial advisers. Understand the true costs and benefits of having the land farmed. Clarify your goals and objectives. The importance of these steps cannot be overstated.

WHAT IS THE OFFER? Here you describe what you are making available for a farming tenant. It could be simple—a ten-acre hayfield. Or it could be more complicated and include various fields, buildings, fencing, equipment, and the potential to place additional structures. The offer can be quite specific (for example, five acres of prime soil, well and barn, no housing, suitable for vegetables) or open-ended (for example, fifty-acre parcel; landowner open to various enterprises, housing possible, may lead to eventual ownership). In an offer, you articulate the conditions of the agreement, including the length of the lease term, preferred start date, any special arrangements about fees, improvements, building equity, and other considerations that will be important to prospective tenants. The offering is a summary of what your faith community has and wants.



TIP:

It's advised to get a lease in writing, even though there are situations when a verbal lease may feel more appropriate. If a landowner and lessee have operated on a handshake agreement for years, requesting a lease in writing may be perceived as a sign of new distrust. For a member of a congregation leasing land from their own church, a verbal agreement may feel adequately secure. Nonetheless, working out the details of a written agreement can help the parties clearly articulate their needs and goals and come to a comfortable consensus that protects everyone involved.

DETERMINE CRITERIA AND QUALIFICATIONS FOR APPLICANTS.

The first step is to refer to your mission and goals. Are you looking to support a member of your faith community? Or is your purpose to provide opportunity to historically marginalized farmers? With that overarching criterion, decide what you are looking for in a tenant, including personal qualities and professional profile. Seek someone who can meet your rental and other financial requirements and who can demonstrate experience and expertise, but also consider factors such as communication skills, trust, and integrity. If you want a beginning farmer, look for evidence of an achievable business plan even though they may not have the financial resources or equipment of a more established operator.

At minimum, you should require a résumé and references, particularly from past landlords or employers. Ask for evidence that the farmer will be able to meet his or her lease obligations and is professional in their commitments. This does not mean going through the prospect's business plan. Farmers differ widely on their businesses, as well as on what they have in the way of a business plan. You *want* them to be successful. You *need* them to meet the terms of your agreement.

CONDUCT THE SEARCH. There are various strategies for locating a farmer. Word of mouth might do the trick. However, a more systematic and comprehensive approach is often warranted. Designing the search strategy can structure your efforts.

1. Decide what you want to say and ask for in your public offering advertisement.
2. Write effective ads, postings, and fliers based on your offering.
3. Identify the best ways and places to advertise, post, and promote your offering.
4. Organize a system for tracking your outreach. For example, will an ad or posting expire? Could you post your flier at an upcoming conference?

Strategies for locating a farmer include:

Post the offer with a farm link program and/or other farm property lists. Most of these are online.

Place an ad in an agricultural publication and/or local newspaper.

Post a notice at agricultural events, supply stores, and equipment dealerships.

Talk with people in the agricultural community such as university extension staff, agricultural service providers, county conservation district officers, and farm organization personnel. Let local land trusts, agricultural commissions, and local agricultural organizations know about your offering.

Look at Soul Fire Farm and Northeast Farmers of Color's [Reparations Map for Black Farmers](#) and see if any farmers are seeking land in your area.

Use your networks, including faith-based groups and events (in-person and virtual).

Work with a realtor.

Consider **holding an open house** or site visits to meet interested farmers and give them a sense of what's on offer.

Your offer should briefly describe your selection process—link to an application, process for inquiries and interviews, deadlines. Professional help could aid these next steps. Determining what you want in an application and interview depends in part on your offer and your selection criteria. Be clear about what and whom you are looking for. How will the candidate address or meet your vision for this agreement?

Negotiating a Good Lease & Good Farmer-Landlord Relationships

Virtually all farmer-tenants and farm landlords will say that the relationship is the most important factor in success. Communicating effectively with a tenant is crucial in developing a clear and mutually agreeable lease and ensuring a productive and sustainable landlord-tenant relationship. While it is not necessary to be an expert on agriculture and farmland leasing before talking to a tenant, it is important to get good information and to be open to learning from a farmer.

TIP:

No matter the type of farmer, it's essential to remember that the leasing farmer is not your employee. Farmers need and require autonomy to be successful. For this reason, it is important to spell out expectations for both parties in the lease.

MAINTAIN COMMUNICATION THROUGHOUT THE LEASE TERM. You can specify in the lease that you and the tenant will communicate at regular intervals, such as before planting, after harvest, or when the annual rent is due. Aim for genuine interest rather than intrusiveness. When the landlord is an organization, it is good practice to assign an individual or committee as liaison with the farming tenant, serving as a point of contact responsible for monitoring, managing payments, responding to tenant questions, and reporting tenant concerns or repair needs. Sometimes an organization will outsource some of these functions if in-house capacity is limited. For example, they might hire a consultant familiar with farming to conduct an annual site inspection.

BE OPEN TO MODIFICATIONS. Everything that might arise simply cannot be addressed in a lease agreement. It is important to be flexible in the lease negotiations and to remain open to negotiations on matters that were not addressed in the initial lease or about things that happen or change along the way. Leases are living documents. Any modifications to the lease terms should be documented in writing and signed by both parties.

ALLOW FOR MISTAKES. Again, this is a relationship. If the tenant is not following the lease terms or not meeting expectations, work to solve the problem together. Default should be a last resort. It takes time and effort for landowners and farming tenants to know each other and the fluid, ever-changing nature of farming. With a strong foundation and basic shared values, the landlord-tenant relationship can be one of mutual learning and reward.

BE CLEAR ABOUT EXPECTATIONS. Discuss your expectations regarding the farm operation and how the terms of the lease will be monitored. For instance, many tenants fear that their landlords will see the appearance of weeds on the property as an indication of poor farming skills or laziness rather than a conscious management strategy.

ACKNOWLEDGE INJUSTICES AND EMBRACE DIFFERENCES. Faith communities have a unique opportunity to redress historical as well as contemporary inequities, and to demonstrate tolerance. A white church leasing to a Black farmer in a region with a history of sharecropping and land dispossession can be a powerful healing act; so can leasing to a group of immigrants, a military veteran family, or a lesbian couple. If education is a goal, integrate history about the intersection between farming and Indigenous lands, structural racism, and religious intolerance.



RESOURCES

from Land for Good:

[Leasing Land to Farmers:](#)
[A Handbook for New England](#)
[Land Trusts, Municipalities and](#)
[Institutions](#)
[Leasing Toolbox](#)
[Landowner Toolbox](#)
[Build-a-Lease](#)

from Center for Agriculture and
Food Systems:

[Farmland Access Legal Toolkit](#)

[Equity Trust](#)
[Farm Commons](#)
[American Farmland Trust Directory of Farm](#)
[Link Programs](#)
[Land Grant University Website Directory](#)

LANDOWNER CHECKLIST

From when you first consider leasing your land for agricultural use to the time you sign a lease (or other agreement) with a farmer, there are many important details to consider. This list will help you keep track of each step on your way to a successful contract.

1

What is the suitability of the property you are considering leasing?

- ☐ Soils (prime farmland with no or few constraints, or soils with significant constraints such as wetlands, drainage problems, stoniness, ledge)
 - ☐ Topography (level, moderate, or steep slopes)
 - ☐ Land orientation and microclimates, such as frost pockets
 - ☐ Current use(s) and management (open fields mowed, recently tilled, hay, pasture, orchard, tree farm, forested)
 - ☐ Invasive species or other aggressive vegetation that creates management issues
 - ☐ Water source (existing supply, spring or creek that could be developed)
 - ☐ Existing fences and stone walls
 - ☐ Existing buildings and their condition (barn, house, storage facility)
 - ☐ Access for the farmer (good road, driveway, unimpeded, or with constraints)
 - ☐ Neighbors (farmers or suburban residents, how many, how supportive of agriculture)
 - ☐ History of public access
 - ☐ Non-agricultural resources (wildlife habitat, wetlands, vernal pools, drinking water supplies) and their compatibility with agriculture
 - ☐ Other land uses such as hiking, biking, skiing, hunting, swimming
-

2

Are there legal constraints to leasing your property for agriculture?

- ☐ Conservation easements or deed restrictions that restrict uses and activities
 - ☐ Zoning limitations and restrictions
 - ☐ Liens, rights-of-way, other easements
 - ☐ Tax considerations (property taxes, rental income)
-

3

Who needs to be involved in decisions around leasing your land?

- ☐ Institution executive director
- ☐ “Higher-up” bodies of authority (the archdiocese, for example)
- ☐ Faith leaders
- ☐ Board of directors
- ☐ Legal counsel for your organization
- ☐ Committees, commissions, ministries, or boards

4

What are your organization's interests, purpose, and goals for leasing your land for farming?

- ☐ Advancing your organization's mission
- ☐ Sustaining agriculture and working farms in your greater community
- ☐ Supporting land access for BIPOC farmers
- ☐ Encouraging, assisting, or supporting beginning farmers
- ☐ Addressing stewardship for your property
- ☐ Promoting and increasing sustainability in your community
- ☐ Protecting the environment including water quality and natural habitat
- ☐ Providing educational opportunities
- ☐ Engaging members of your faith community or the surrounding community
- ☐ Protecting and improving scenic character or specific vistas
- ☐ Protecting a historic or culturally important landscape
- ☐ Supporting your community's agricultural economy
- ☐ Maintaining or increasing local food production
- ☐ Providing food for low-access populations, food banks, pantries, or schools
- ☐ Maintaining or improving your group's relationship with the community and/or its farmers
- ☐ Generating income
- ☐ Delegating land management tasks and responsibilities
- ☐ Other _____

5

What level and type of agricultural activity do you want on your property?

- ☐ Level of cultivation and intensity of agricultural management

- ☐ Specific management regime (organic, regenerative, biodynamic)
- ☐ Types of animals allowed, if any (chickens, turkeys, sheep, cattle, pigs)
- ☐ Farm practices requirements (organic, biodynamic, sustainable, conventional)
- ☐ Farm sales (a farm stand, a pick-your-own operation, CSA pickups)

6

Improvements on the property

- ☐ Fencing to keep animals in and/or to protect crops from predators or wildlife damage
- ☐ Water (well, pond, spring development)
- ☐ Temporary structures, including hoop houses, high tunnels to extend the growing season, or animal shelters such as chicken coops
- ☐ Planting perennial or long lifecycle crops (nut trees, fruit trees, berries)
- ☐ Soil improvements (fertilizer, lime, organic matter)
- ☐ Drainage improvements
- ☐ Responsibility for costs of improvements (landowner, farmer, shared)
- ☐ Ownership of improvements (landowner or farmer)

7

Your role

- ☐ Leasing the land to a farmer and being uninvolved in the farming operation, except as landlord
 - ☐ Leasing the land to a farmer and being uninvolved in the farming, but requiring a portion of produce (possibly in exchange for rent) donated to a local food pantry
 - ☐ Leasing the land to a farmer and being uninvolved in the farming operation, but providing the farmer with volunteer support (according to a clear agreement) for farm work or distribution of farm products
-

8

Compensation

- ☐ Cash payment
 - ☐ Share of farm products
 - ☐ Services such as mowing fields, maintaining fences, managing invasive species, or conducting programs for the public
-

9

Lease term and security

- ☐ Annual, with or without renewal option
- ☐ Short-term, two to five years with provisions for renewal
- ☐ Rolling lease term
- ☐ Long-term ____ years
- ☐ Very long-term ground lease (ninety-nine years)

10

Involving stakeholders

- ☐ Boards or committees not already involved in the initial discussions
- ☐ Organization(s) holding the conservation easement, if any
- ☐ Neighbors
- ☐ Land trust or other conservation organization
- ☐ Members of a marginalized or dispossessed community you wish to support
- ☐ Town residents
- ☐ Methods for sharing information
- ☐ Process for input and feedback



Photos courtesy of Cameron Terry.

A FARMER'S PERSPECTIVE ON LEASING

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN

October 2017

WHERE

Roanoke City, Virginia

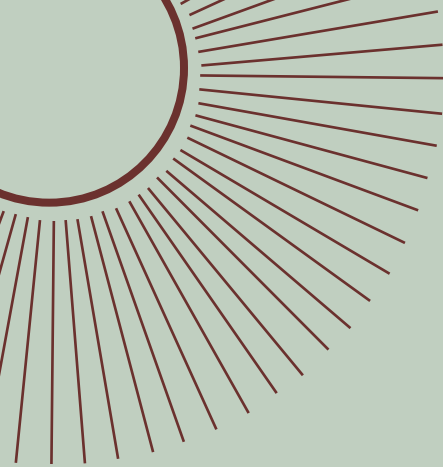
WHAT

Garden Variety Harvests, an urban farm and market garden

MISSION/PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Building community around food production

Based on interviews with Cameron Terry



To start his farm, Cameron Terry built a network of backyard gardens. As of 2020, he leases three properties from homeowners, trading a weekly share of vegetables for use of their property. The homeowners agree not to use new products without his approval—problems can spread quickly in a small garden, and homeowners may not be aware of the risk.



“Production is not always well-groomed.”

Property owners need to be supportive on pest issues; they need to understand that farming is often but not always pretty.

For instance, a field of sod may need to wear a big plastic tarp for three months before it can be transitioned to vegetable farmland.

“Don’t make assumptions.”

Everything should be on the table, with the farmer’s goals and property owner’s goals clearly communicated. If the faith community carries expectations or goals about charity, they should be clear; from the farmer’s standpoint, farming is a business. Any and all demands on production should be clear—and may or may not work for a production farm. On the other hand, a team of volunteers could earn equity from the farmer, supporting the agreed-upon donation of produce to the local food pantry. Or the rent could be paid in trade instead of cash, with a share of produce donated to the faith community or food pantry.

It is important to understand the realities of farming before entering into a lease agreement with a farmer. Terry says some landowners back out for this reason. But others, inspired by the transformation of their unused grass, have continued farming or gardening after he has moved on.



Photo by Scott Neely.

URBAN TEACHING FARM

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN
2017

WHERE
Greensboro, North Carolina

WHAT

organic production farm with no-cost lease and full-time farm manager

MISSION/PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Food security; sustainability; learning opportunities for volunteers, students, and families in the surrounding community

Based on interviews with Lilly Emendy, Don Milholin, and Matt Canniff-Kesecker

Originally planted as a mission church in the historically African American neighborhood of Warnersville, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church was founded on a philosophy of service. Just south of Greensboro, the community is named for a Quaker who bought 35 acres in 1865, land that he parceled out to formerly enslaved people. What grew into a self-sufficient Black community was redlined and bulldozed in the 1960s. Prince of Peace was born around that time, and from its early years has focused on outreach, from efforts to build affordable housing to health ministries to work preserving the neighborhood's history. In 2015, Warnersville was officially designated a Heritage Community.

Out of the Garden Project was founded in response to food insecurity in the Piedmont region of North Carolina, and the core of their work is distributing healthy food to families in the area. The nonprofit was named for the joy and hope and love that come out of the garden, and the founders had always envisioned the organization having a farm. In 2017, the nonprofit secured a two-year grant from the Rotary Foundation, supporting the costs necessary to establish the Urban Teaching Farm and cover the farm manager's salary for two years. All they needed was a piece of land.

Prince of Peace had started its own community garden in the early 2000s, but over time the project's energy ran out. The land had been fallow for a few years when a member of the church heard that Out of the Garden was looking for a piece of land to farm. Lay leadership was on board from the start—in fact, a leader in the congregation made the decision to move forward on signing the no-cost, five-year lease even though they were between pastors at the time.

Out of the Garden posted the job listing for farm manager on social media and shared it through word of mouth. That led them to Lilly Emendy, who came on as farm manager in 2018.

Two powerful tools have made the partnership successful, Emendy says. First is the clarity of the lease agreement. The initial lease term is five years, giving Out of the Garden enough time to amend the soil, establish the farm, and get a real feeling for what they might produce. It includes clear guidelines on what the farmers can do, what they can't do, and what they need to seek permission for. For instance, all of Urban Teaching Farm's infrastructure is "temporary," meaning that they have not poured concrete nor installed electric lines; their irrigation lines aren't buried; and their wash house is built on a floating deck. When Urban Teaching Farm wanted to put in a kitchen station to enable farmworkers to have mid-day meals, they discussed their plans multiple times to ensure that they had the congregation's buy-in.

It's a benefit to the congregation to have the farm on-site, just in terms of good energy. "I thought you were closed," people have said, but when they saw the life around the farm, they saw that the congregation was still here.

The second tool is Emendy's monthly meeting with Rev. Matt Canniff-Kesecker, in which she provides updates and prevents conflicts from developing about activities and changes that might seem matter of course for a farmer, but be less familiar or run-of-the-mill to a pastor and congregation. For example, the farm team shared their vision for using bees as a tool for pollination and education about pollinators before installing their first hives.

Aside from meeting once a month with the farm manager, nothing is required of the congregation. Wonderful things are happening on their land, and they don't have to do anything. In Canniff-Kesecker's view, the Urban Teaching Farm is what leaders in the congregation wanted but did not have the capacity to do. The presence of interns and farmworkers brings a new vitality to the property. Also, inspired partly by the energy of the farm, Prince of Peace applied for and was awarded funds to build an outdoor picnic pavilion, with the goal of making the site a community gathering space.

It's a benefit to the congregation to have the farm on-site, just in terms of good energy. "I thought you were closed," people have said, but when they saw the life around the farm, they saw that the congregation was still here.

A still life photograph featuring autumnal elements. In the foreground, there are several ripe, red tomatoes and a bunch of bright orange carrots. Above them, a cluster of dried, brown leaves with prominent veins is visible. The background is a soft, out-of-focus orange and yellow, suggesting a warm, autumnal setting. The entire image is framed by a thin white border.

I.

EARTH CARE

RENEWING AND PROTECTING THE LAND

We are planetary.

—Sister Chris Loughlin

*Whoever revives dead land,
for him is reward in it; and
whatever any creature
seeking food eats of it shall
be reckoned as charity from
him.*

—Prophet Muhammad

*Intergenerational solidarity
is not optional, but rather
a basic question of justice,
since the world we have
received also belongs to
those who will follow us.*

—Pope Francis

*Earth-people were created
so we could take care of
Mother Earth. That's our
job. And part of Mother
Earth is the animals. So,
we have to add them onto
our caring lists. They don't
have mouths to speak, but
we see them and we have
to respect them.*

—Brophy Toledo, Flower
Hill Institute



PARTNERING WITH THE LAND

Resilience is rooted in reciprocity—an understanding that the health of the earth is essential to the health of the people who inhabit it, and that the health of one people is linked to the health of all people. Food grown sustainably is healthier for human bodies and for the body of the earth. Regenerative farming strengthens the human connection to the land that sustains us.

Working in collaborative partnership with the land, or participatory conservation, is central to national and global movements to support independent farms and regenerative agriculture. Thoughtfully run farms provide an alternative to the ecological and civic destructiveness of industrial farms, in addition to service as safety nets, community hubs, and sources of healthy food. Industrial farms empty out the countryside and rely on robotics and machinery, driving industrial farmers themselves even farther away from the land. Most industrial farms use synthetic fertilizers that cause nitrous oxide emissions and contribute to global warming. Such fertilizers also deplete soil, which then absorbs less carbon, furthering industrial farming's impact on climate change. Heavy use of pesticides and herbicides facilitate mass production, but they eradicate the good with the bad. Together with intensive monocropping, those practices decrease biodiversity—that most precious gift to all who inhabit planet earth.

For faith communities, honoring the earth is bound with spiritual practice and service to community. There is no one way to renew and care for the earth; just as each temple, each land parcel, and each community is unique, so is each approach to land stewardship. If your community/organization chooses to lease land to a farmer or nonprofit organization, you may collaborate to draft a land management plan, or you may largely defer to them, preferring to facilitate land access and empower the leasing farmer/organization to make their own choices. If you are starting your own farm, you may likewise defer to your farm manager. Even so, a broad understanding of approaches to conservation is helpful; it's important to understand that one farmer's vision of stewarding the land differs from the next's, and may also differ from your own. It's worth your while to have a conversation about conservation plans and sustainable practices with your prospective farm manager or lessee; make sure they know that care of the earth is important to you.

KEY CONCEPTS:

Sustainable farming is an approach to stewardship with the long-term intention that land will nourish future human and animal populations. There is no legal definition of sustainable; like conservation, it can mean different things to different people.

Organic farming is farming in accordance with regulations established by the National Organic Program to support the cycling of on-farm resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity.

Certified naturally grown is a peer-to-peer certification program for farmers who use sustainable and regenerative practices but do not want to pursue organic certification.

Regenerative farming emphasizes soil health, relying on methods to increase biodiversity and build the soil's ability to retain water and carbon.

Climate-smart agriculture is an integrated approach to land and livestock management geared toward mitigating and adapting to climate change while prioritizing global food security.

Permaculture is a whole systems method of design that aims to integrate every component of a landscape and adapt practices to the local environment.

A **land management plan** outlines core principles and practices that will or will not be used on a piece of land. A land management plan can be but is not necessarily attached to a lease agreement.





Resilience refers to an ecosystem's capacity to recover from catastrophic events like fires, floods, and droughts. Regenerative methods strengthen the farm ecosystem, building resilience and even supporting the health of the ecosystem beyond the farm.

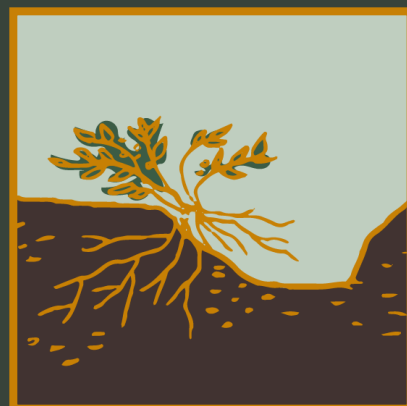
Earth care is land stewardship that understands the earth as a living entity. Earth care includes caring for the living soil, vital watersheds, and all life forms.

Sustainable Approaches

For nonfarmers, the most familiar tenet of sustainable farming is using only organic inputs, which means no synthetic pesticides or herbicides and no genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Using lots of chemicals is a health risk to farmworkers and the people who eat the tomatoes grown in a field and degrades the earth itself, starting off an addictive cycle that depends on more and more additives, antibiotics, and tons of plastic. **SOIL HEALTH** is key to the health of any piece of land and to the healthfulness of the fruits and vegetables that grow there. Cover crops (also known as green manures), animal manures, compost, and mulches can all help to build healthy soil. Crop rotation increases soil fertility by building new organic matter. Cover crops and mulches can also help retain moisture and control weeds.

Supporting biodiversity above ground is also important. That might mean raising companion crops or planting diverse vegetation and crops to increase the insect and spider population. It could mean introducing habitat for beneficial insects, like ladybugs, which feast on aphids. It might even mean providing habitat for coyotes, who can help control rodent populations.

You can practice sustainable and regenerative farming without being certified, but there are two certification programs that every farmer should know about.



DEPLETED SOIL

VS.

HEALTHY SOIL



ORGANIC

Organic is the term most often associated with sustainable farming, but farmers have differing ideas on what it means to farm organically. While the organic movement was built by small, independent farmers, organic practices have more recently been adopted by industrial-scale farms and corporations. These farms may be certified organic, but some small-scale farmers do not view their production methods as regenerative or sustainable.

So, what is organic? Legally speaking, organic certification is the process of verifying compliance with organic regulations, established in the United States through the National Organic Program.⁵⁶ Organic farms and ranches must use practices that maintain or improve soil and water quality while sustaining biodiversity through the conservation of wetlands, woodlands, and wildlife. Organic farmers may not use synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, irradiation, GMOs, or (with a few very specific exceptions) chemical herbicides and pesticides.

State departments of agriculture and numerous private companies and nonprofits are accredited to certify a farm as organic; the USDA hosts an [Organic Certifier Locator](#) on their website. Organic certification is not a simple process. It involves extensive documentation, including the development of an Organic System Plan, and detailed records on everything from seed receipts to the application of compost or fertilizer to a field. The application process can take up to six months, and inspections are completed by a third-party certifier. Because of the paperwork involved, the real cost of organic certification, especially for a small farm, can be higher than the fees paid to maintain certification. Organic certification is especially valuable for growers wanting to sell to a high-end market and for production farms who want to earn premium prices on produce or meat sold through major grocers and retail chains.

- PROS:**
- Requires articulating a clear plan** for organic practices, so the farm truly becomes 100 percent organic
 - Increased prices**, especially when sold in wholesale markets
 - Access** to wholesale markets

- CONS:**
- Can be **expensive**
 - Lots of **paperwork**
 - Increased prices **may exclude communities** and individuals with less access to financial resources

CERTIFIED NATURALLY GROWN

[Certified Naturally Grown \(CNG\)](#) is a certification program designed for small-scale farmers and producers who market directly to customers in their local communities. CNG farmers commit to robust organic practices, modeled on the standards of the National Organic Program, but through using a sliding-scale model for annual dues, certification is cheaper and more grassroots than the national program. Annual inspections use a peer-review model, so the program encourages knowledge exchange and the growth of peer support networks. Every CNG-certified producer has a profile on the website, where their application and inspection reports are posted—so the process is transparent and open to the public. Some farmers use CNG certification to transition to certified organic, and some stick with CNG because it fits their needs.

- PROS:**
- Demonstration of your farm's **commitment to farming organic**
 - Connections** with other farmers in your community
 - Affordability**

- CONS:**
- Carrots and lettuce raised CNG **cannot be marketed or packaged as certified organic**, so it's less useful for farmers planning to sell through third parties, like grocery stores that belong to a national chain
 - Lesser known** in some communities than others

REGENERATIVE ORGANIC

A third certification, “regenerative organic,” is currently under development. Like organic farming, regenerative organic farming relies on practices that regenerate land and natural resources instead of using conventional practices that degrade the earth, water, and living beings. Regenerative organic farming additionally includes practices that build soil health, ensure animal welfare, and support social justice.⁵⁷

PERMACULTURE

Inspired largely by Indigenous practices and traditions, permaculture is a whole systems method of design that operates on three core principles: care for earth, care for people, and reinvestiture and redistribution of surplus. Unlike intensive monoculture, whole systems designs consider every aspect of land use, from energy inputs to water flow to community to climate to income. The seven domains⁵⁸ of permaculture action include health and spiritual well-being alongside land and nature stewardship. It is an integrative system that borrows from holistic practices of Indigenous peoples around the world; permaculture design is deeply localized, adapted to the culture and landscape of a place. Avoid permaculture practitioners/instructors who claim intellectual ownership of traditional Indigenous practices without so much as acknowledging their origins; if the permaculture model appeals to you, learn from practitioners like Roxanne Swentzell of the [Flowering Tree Permaculture Institute](#).

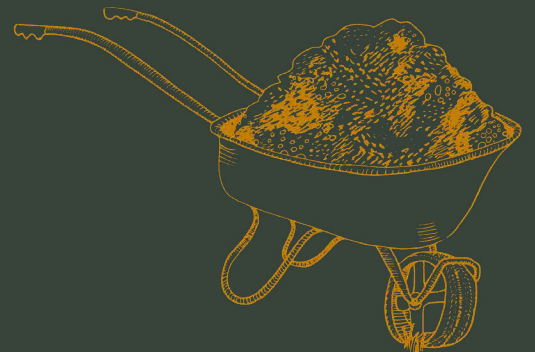
LAND MANAGEMENT PLANS

Even if you do not plan to apply for certification, you can create a land management plan. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), an agency of the USDA, assists landowners who want to develop a conservation management plan. This is a dynamic process that involves soil evaluations, goal-setting, and sharing resources and strategies to help landowners meet their goals.⁵⁹

If you or your faith community plan to lease to a farmer, you and the farmer may want to include a conservation plan or outline agreed-upon practices in the lease.

Some farmers and landlords prefer broad values statements about conservation, while others detail strict requirements in the lease. For instance, you could establish a principle of promoting biodiversity or agree that woodland be managed to support migratory bird habitat. A more detailed plan might stipulate that a certain proportion of acres be targeted for soil improvement measures, or that the farmer use only no-till methods.

As a landlord, you can support a farmer’s investment in sustainable or regenerative practices by reimbursing the farmer for the cost of related improvements or by sharing the cost of implementing those practices, such as the costs associated with organic certification.⁶⁰ You can also agree to adjust rent, leasing at a lower rate to give the farmer time to regenerate land that has been depleted or damaged. In general, it’s better to agree to principles and practices rather than outcomes, as outcomes (like the degree of soil erosion) can be influenced by factors beyond a farmer’s control. Keep in mind that while farmers may be aligned with your stewardship principles, most prefer autonomy and flexibility around how they farm.



If you plan to start your own farm and let your farm manager lead the way, you can likewise agree to key principles and practices.

Here are a few of many possible strategies to consider:

Avoid synthetic chemicals

Adapt certified organic methods for weed and pest control

Use natural fertilizers rather than nitrogen-heavy synthetic fertilizers

Start a compost program

Source compost from a local facility

Source organic seeds from local growers/producers and save seeds to use the following season

Use cover crops and mulches

Rotate crops and prioritize crop diversity

Plant companion crops

Plant trees

Install drip irrigation

Integrate water-saving practices, such as water catchment systems

Diversify the farm, for example using chickens for insect management as well as providing eggs

Manage grazing practices

Employ no-till methods

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER IN DEVELOPING A LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN

These questions can help establish some key principles and decide whether to pursue certification. It's essential to involve your farm manager, lessee, Earth ministry, faith leadership, core volunteers, or whoever will be responsible for leading stewardship of the land.

What is the current **condition of the land? The soil?**

How has the land been used for the past three years? Have pesticides, herbicides, or other chemicals been applied to the land?

Are invasive plants present on the land? How can these be managed without the use of chemicals? Can they be integrated into a productive landscape?

What activities are naturally suitable to the zone and region?

What principles of regenerative farming matter most to you?

Examples include rebuilding soil health to grow nutrient-rich fruits and vegetables for your greater community, protecting animal welfare to provide the community with meat raised in accordance to your/their ethical principles, and employing practices that increase carbon sequestration.

If you or your lessee plan to raise food for sale, to whom do you plan to sell? Will there be financial benefit to obtaining organic certification for the farm? Do you have the resources (funds, skills) to obtain organic certification? Will local customers be able to afford the higher prices usually needed to sustain organic certification, or is there an alternative way you can fund certification costs?

What regenerative strategies are most accessible to you or your lessee? If you plan to run a community garden, for instance, do you have space to start a composting program, or would sourcing from a local composting facility be a more accessible option? Have you agreed to a long-term lease to support a lessee farmer's investment in tree planting?

PROTECTING FARMLAND

One way to protect land is with a conservation easement. A conservation easement is a voluntary,

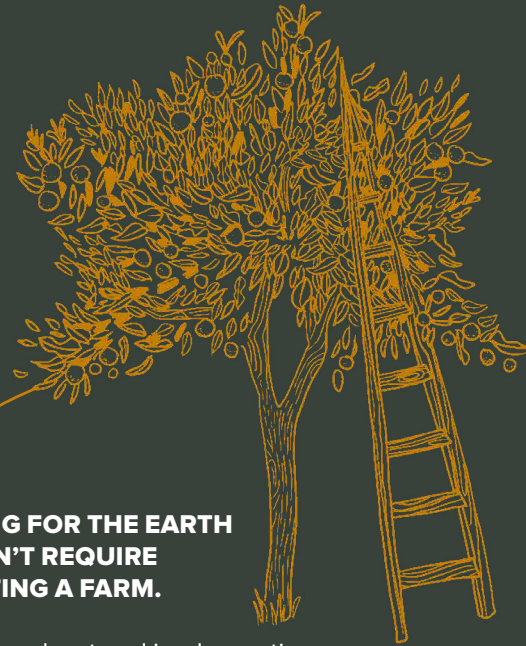
binding agreement between a landowner and a qualifying conservation agency, such as a land trust, that limits the uses of land in order to protect the land, whether for animal habitat, restoring and preserving healthy watersheds and ecosystems, protecting viewsheds and open space, or a combination of these. In donating or selling a conservation easement to a land trust, the owner donates or sells a portion of their property rights, such as the right to subdivide or develop the land.⁶¹

A working farm easement is an agricultural conservation easement that includes a farmer ownership and affordability provision.

It requires that the land be sold to a farmer and allows the easement holder to step in and buy the land at agricultural value if a qualified farmer cannot be found.⁶²

In a ground lease, the tenant rents the land and owns the improvements on it. These are usually long-term leases, sometimes for ten years and even as long as ninety-nine years.

Donating to a land trust or conservation organization is another strategy for long-term protection of a piece of land. To learn more about conservation easements, working farm easements, or working with a land trust, see "[Partnering with a Land Trust](#)".



CARING FOR THE EARTH DOESN'T REQUIRE STARTING A FARM.

Learning about and implementing sustainable approaches to land-scaping can be a starting point for faith communities whose land is not suited to or available for farming, or who want to start small. A faith group that changes its land-scaping practices and energy use can be a model for other groups and for individuals, and in that way can encourage the resilience of their local community.

South Seattle's Chua Co Lam Pagoda uses cisterns and water catchment systems to irrigate onsite gardens, including the vegetable garden used for cooking.

At Pie Ranch, the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band raises native plants, from grasses to berries to medicines, creating opportunities to teach and learn about ethnobotany, traditional ecological knowledge, and stewardship of the land.

With the help of their land trust partners, the Sisters of St. Joseph identified five acres of degraded land on which to install a solar panel array. The 1MW ground-mounted system includes 3,192 panels and is producing an estimated 1,300,000 kWh of energy per year. It supplies 63 percent of the energy used at the sisters' Brentwood campus, which includes residences, long-term care, farms, and more.





Photos courtesy of Methodist Theological School of Ohio.

SEMINARY HILL FARM

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN
2013

WHERE
Delaware, Ohio, on the campus of Methodist
Theological School in Ohio

WHAT
a regenerative fruit and vegetable farm operated by a full-time farm manager, staff, students,
interns, and volunteers

MISSION/PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES
Teaching small-scale farming and producing good food in pursuit of a just, sustainable, and
generative world

On a frigid day in December 2013, a group gathered on the snowy campus of Methodist Theological School in Ohio (MTSO) to erect the first of two agricultural hoop houses. It was the first tangible sign of a project that had been germinating for a couple of years: the founding of MTSO's Seminary Hill Farm.

Soon after the arrival of President Jay Rundell in 2006, MTSO began incorporating ecotheology into its curriculum and exploring ways to better steward its 80-acre campus. An idea emerged to better use vacant campus land, much of which the school was paying to mow, by starting a farm that could provide fresh local produce to the campus dining hall and through sales and donations in the surrounding community. A farm could also model best practices for seminary students and other religious organizations, many of which own unused land that could be used to grow food. Today, Seminary Hill Farm has expanded to 10 acres and become the most visible component of MTSO's wide-ranging commitments to sustainability, which include the installation of a solar array to power some campus facilities and geothermal wells to heat and cool them.



Taking advantage of unique synergy between the farm and educational facilities, MTSO has hosted regional, national, and international gatherings around ecotheology. In 2019, MTSO joined with the Center for Earth Ethics, the Climate Reality Project, and Ohio State University to host a three-day conference, "On Food and Faith: Ministry in the Time of Climate Change." Former Vice President Al Gore, founder and chairman of the Climate Reality Project, participated in all three days of the conference. "Having learned of the fantastic work that's been under way for quite some time at MTSO, it seemed like a wonderful opportunity to have the training on this beautiful campus this year," Gore said. "It's an extraordinary place—a school and a farm, all together. I've really enjoyed it, and I've learned a lot."

Initial development of Seminary Hill Farm was the construction of two 30- by 96-foot high hoop houses. Season extension plays a significant role in small scale agriculture, and the farm was able to begin producing greens for the campus dining service in February of its first year.

Because MTSO hadn't been spraying the land, it was possible to become USDA Certified Organic right away. The requirements to operate organically—seed search checklists, field work and input tracking documents, third party audits, and so on—can seem daunting to a young farm. But organic certification helped the young farm to market its produce to members of its community supported agriculture (CSA) program, farmers' markets, and local restaurants.

Seminary Hill Farm combines traditional and Indigenous knowledge with what we continue to learn about how vibrant ecosystems function. By mimicking nature, we tap into cycles that maintain the biodiversity, resilience, and integrity of soils. We seek to minimize off-farm inputs by utilizing more on-farm resources. The farming system is information and management intensive—but not necessarily labor intensive, though all "good work" does require daily physical interaction with the soil.

Here are some specific examples of the sustainable methods we use:

Organic matter management: Soil organic matter is the foundation that maintains soil life. It serves as the habitat for a diverse, dynamic population of soil microorganisms, micro and macro arthropods, invertebrates, and vertebrates. Organic matter is produced by turning cover crops and other fresh plant matter into the soil. These "green manures" replace the use of animal-based manures. Through harvesting on-site organic matter to build, amend, and mulch, and to compost into stable humus, we build soil organic matter over time.

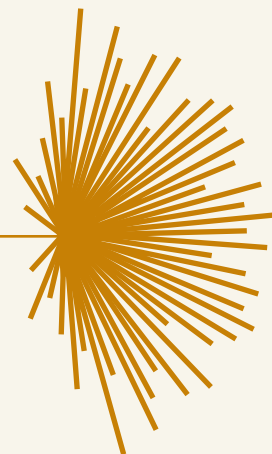
The campus has two five-acre fields at opposite ends of the campus; the farm used one the first three years and expanded in the fourth year, while adding a 32- by 72-foot transplant production greenhouse in 2018. After five years of organic certification, MTSO successfully pursued an alternate certification: Certified Naturally Grown (CNG). It remains committed to sustainable, regenerative practices and principles.

Over the years, the MTSO community has evolved with the farm. Students and community members have watched the farm expand. Community members have engaged in the CSA program, both on campus and throughout greater Columbus, and shared in the abundance of both produce and common purpose. MTSO set out to build a campus farm and has, seven years later, discovered a true sense of community bound together in celebration of sustainable agriculture and local food.

Long-term crop rotations: By creating and maintaining longer term (more than two or three years) crop rotations, we not only build soil organic matter but also create the ability to better manage insect pests, diseases, and weeds, and, most important, incorporate rest into the soil's life. From rest comes regeneration, and from regeneration comes sustainable production as the cycle continues year after year. We presently have a five-year crop rotation.

Season extension: By extending the traditional spring-to-fall growing season to the entire year, we enhance not only our ability to produce, but our ability to eat and, moreover, teach how to grow and eat seasonally. Greenhouses, hoop houses, hot frames, cold frames, row covers, and shade clothes are all tools we use to extend Seminary Hill Farm's season to year-round.

Community engagement / social justice: By engaging with community, introducing diverse students and community members to farming, and participating in MTSO's Community Food and Wellness initiative, Seminary Hill Farm supports the social and cultural sustainability of farming.





Photos courtesy of Zaytuna College.

ZAYTUNA COLLEGE CENTER FOR ETHICAL LIVING AND LEARNING

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN
2018

WHERE
Berkeley, California

WHAT

a permaculture garden and training center rooted in ethical principles of Islam

MISSION/PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES

To produce food that is both *halal* and *tayyib* (licit and pure); to build a garden with long-term benefits for the college and surrounding community; to bring together sustainability research, applied ethics, and experiential learning that support alternatives to dominant modes of food production

DAWOOD

Yasin

During a May 2014 lecture, Zaytuna College president Hamza Yusuf shared the wisdom of one of Islam's perennial scholars, Abū'l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn Ibn Muḥammad, better known as al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī. He quoted from *Al-Dharī'a*

ilā makārim al-Sharī'a (The Path to the Noble Qualities of the Sacred Law):

[M]an has three specific functions. **The first is to cultivate and prosper in the earth ('imāratal-arḍ)**, which is stated in the verse 'He brought you out from the earth and made you inhabit it' (Qur'an 11:61). He should obtain his livelihood from the earth, for himself and others. **The second is to worship God**, as is stated: 'I have not created jinn and mankind except to worship Me' (Qur'an 51:56). This means man should obey God's commands and prohibitions. **The third is his vicegerency**, which is mentioned in: 'And [I will] make you successors in the land and, then, [I will] observe what you will do' (Qur'an 7:129). This [vicegerency] is the imitation of God in accordance with man's ability to rule by applying the noble qualities of the Law, which are wisdom, justice, forbearance, beneficence and graciousness. Their purpose is to gain Paradise and proximity to God.

In the spirit of al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī's wisdom, we have created a garden and orchard on the Upper Campus at Zaytuna College. The Zaytuna College Permaculture Garden is part of the college's Center for Ethical Living and Learning and provides a source of sustenance through food production and participatory education. Our permaculture garden consists of 20 hexagonal raised beds equaling roughly 800 square feet of planting space and can be enjoyed by students and visitors alike.



The project began in February 2019, and was completed in July. The beds were not planted that year due to pending permits for deer-fencing. In 2020, we installed a temporary fence and planted all of our beds. Our initial planting included fruits and berries; herbs, from mint to rosemary to cilantro; and vegetables, including lettuce, tomatoes, eggplants, broad beans, and squash. Next to the raised beds we planted approximately thirty fruit-bearing trees, some selected to reflect fruit mentioned throughout the Qur'an. Olives, dates, figs, and pomegranates are prominent in the numerous verses that reference agriculture and the environment. We plan to press the olives into oil. The date trees are limited in their fruit production and more ornamental, but the pomegranates will make everyone happy, and President Yusuf has staked his claim on the figs.


We are working closely with scholars and consultants in the field of permaculture to build a garden that will benefit our college, Center, and community for years to come. Exercises offered in our annual Permaculture Design Certification course, such as composting, will provide us with rich soil, which is the foundation of our garden. In the near future we plan to implement sustainable composting practices and gray water irrigation methods that will help minimize our waste and carbon footprint.

Such an undertaking—one with the potential to produce approximately 5,000 pounds of food in a growing season—is daunting. The learning curve is steep! In the first year, gophers ate nearly every single one of the nitrogen-fixing plants that made up the understory of our orchard. Our peaches and plums were severely afflicted with leaf curl, significantly limiting fruit production. The COVID-19 pandemic has kept students off campus, limiting our ability to host experiential educational programs, and, quite frankly, leaving us with more food than we can eat.

Over the long term, the Center for Ethical Living and Learning intends to build a network of scholars to develop curricula and learning materials for high schools, colleges, universities, and public seminars. Its primary function will be to highlight the flaws in current systems of production and patterns of consumption, and their destructiveness to nature. The Center intends to propose alternatives informed by the ethical standards of divine law. Our plan includes experimental farms where permaculture and other alternative farming methods will be taught, including urban gardening and natural methods of animal husbandry.

The natural cycle is in balance and that is how I make the correlation between earth care, permaculture, and Islamic principles.

Permaculture is often defined as combining permanence with agriculture. I understand this to mean earth care should, as much as possible, seek to replicate the natural cycle of life, death, decay, and regrowth. To me, Earth care is seeking to maintain the balance that exists between plant life: what plants are best suited as companions, or will attract ladybugs to help with aphid infestations, or are nitrogen fixers that resupply depleted soils. The natural cycle is in balance and that is how I make the correlation between earth care, permaculture, and Islamic principles.

A composite image featuring a woman's face, corn stalks, and pumpkins. The woman's face is partially obscured by the corn stalks and pumpkins, with her eyes and mouth visible. The background is a soft, hazy landscape with a sunset or sunrise sky. The image is framed by a thin black border.

J.

COMMUNITY REWARDS / MUTUAL BENEFITS

All cultures have their origin stories, and our values and perceptions are created from our origin stories.

—Sister Chris Loughlin

Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin. Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement, to get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted.

—Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

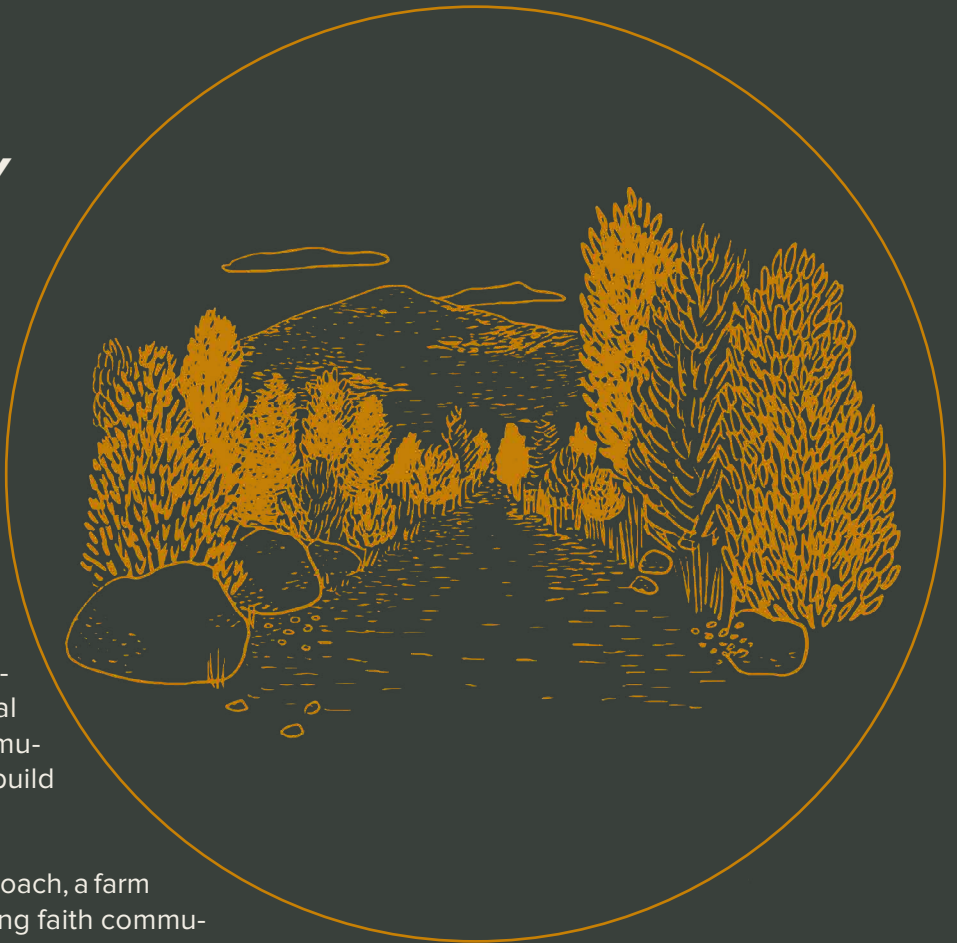
For us the highest purpose of this world is not merely living in it, knowing it and making use of it, but realizing our own selves in it through expansion of sympathy; not alienating ourselves from it and dominating it, but comprehending and uniting it with ourselves in perfect union.

—Rabindranath Tagore

WHY FARM? WHY INVITE FARMERS TO FARM YOUR LAND?

Land leased affordably and securely can support the next generation of farmers. Growing local gardens and farms can support food access and education, deepening human connection to our life source. Land donated to the descendants of enslaved or Indigenous peoples can support social justice and the health of the community. Together, this work can help build resilient communities.

No matter what the structure or approach, a farm provides benefits to the land-owning faith community as well as benefits to the surrounding community—the faith community's neighbors. Every neighborhood, like every canyon and river, belongs to an ecosystem. What happens in the neighborhood ripples outward, and what happens in the greater ecosystem flows into and impacts the neighborhood.



HOW CAN FARMING, OR SUPPORTING FARMING, BENEFIT YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY?

Opportunities to gather outside of traditional service; opportunities for engagement with the neighborhood and city

Prayer and ceremony on the farm

Community **dinners**

Community **harvest days**

Public events for breaking ground, grant awards

Educational and outdoor experience for children and young adults

Renewal of faith through mentorship of young farmers

Empowerment through the **radical act of growing food**

Healing/building relationships with neighbors

Gifting or returning land to a tribe or BIPOC-led organization as an act of reconciliation that uplifts members of your community as well as the recipients

Reviving and reconnecting to your region or neighborhood's farming history and, through that, building connection to other communities who reside and worship nearby

Building interfaith relationships by inviting members of another faith community with a presence in your area to share your garden space, or providing them access to a small plot to farm alongside yours

Community health

Access to healthy produce for members of your faith community and beyond

Protecting or creating public space (as in the transformation of vacant lots to urban farms) to enrich the lives of children in your faith community as well as those who live in surrounding neighborhoods



HOW CAN YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY'S SUPPORT OF LOCAL FARMS AND FARMERS BENEFIT YOUR GREATER HUMAN COMMUNITY?

Strengthening local food security and resiliency of local food systems

Supporting food sovereignty by raising, or supporting farmers who raise, traditional foods that may not be available locally or that industrial producers do not produce (non-GMO grains, specialty produce, halal beef)

Donating to food pantries

Hosting community pick-your-own events, increasing access to healthy produce for families in need

Creating a community supported agriculture program (CSA) or pop-up market to distribute your farm's produce (or the produce of one or several local farmers)

Healing/reconciliation with neighbors and those indigenous to the land

Demonstrating your respect for others and your commitment to **a shared future through gifting or returning land**

Helping provide the means for others to fulfill their dreams and **fully live and express themselves and their culture**

Engaging the greater community in reconciliation, whether by entering into a long-term lease with a BIPOC farmer or by hosting interfaith harvest days where BIPOC and queer neighbors are invited and honored

Helping members of your faith community or neighborhood overcome historical traumas in relation to land and reconnect to land and food production

Improving mental and physical well-being by spending time outdoors



Serving as a local or regional model for Earth care, and inspiring others to work for the future of the planet and its people

Regenerating the land through rotational grazing practices, the use of cover crops, and other soil-building practices

Growing food sustainably and reconnecting community with land

Installing solar panels, using water catchment systems and other **sustainable landscaping practices**

Working the earth is a lesson in reciprocity, and so with the community rewards of leasing, running, donating, or supporting a farm. The mutual benefits of your work will be specific to your faith community and the principles that drive it. As always, engage everyone who will be involved and affected, whether by a community dinner or a donation!



Photos courtesy of Adamah Farm.

ADAMAH FARM

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN

2001

WHERE

Falls Village, Connecticut

WHAT

a ten-acre production farm, residential fellowship program, and education center

MISSION/PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Gathering pluralistic Jewish community; growing food; building toward climate justice and resilience

Walking between two hybrid chestnut trees that were bred to withstand the blight that decimated Appalachian forest hardwoods a generation ago and will hopefully offer a perennial food source for the generation to come, one might wonder what exactly is Jewish about the farm on Beebe Hill.

JANNA

Siller

The chestnuts stand at the tip of a ten-acre triangle-shaped plot across the street from the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Falls Village, Connecticut. Stroll beyond them, and the surroundings diversify into a small food forest of fruit trees and herbs. Farther still, the land opens up on a scene of colorful stripes painted with the contours of the hill: the ferny green of carrot tops, the deep amethyst of purple cabbage. In autumn, cover crops of cereal grain and legumes practice the ancient art of capturing atmospheric carbon, breaking pest cycles, and enlivening, enriching, stabilizing, and loosening the soil. The field is adorned by rows of blueberry bushes, raspberry brambles, greenhouses, a tool shed, and blue spigots.

Over the hill, heaps of rotting food waste from the retreat center's dining hall mix with the neighborhood's collection of fallen leaves. They stand like dunes in various states of decay while a flock of heritage breed chickens browse. Yearling bucks scavenge the roadside under centennial maple trees, fenced in along a buffet of goat delicacies—poison ivy and bittersweet vines.


Adamah was founded in 2001, when Isabella Freedman educators saw that guests to the center's rural, forested prayer spaces—most of whom had always known religion to be parked in institutions—craved understanding that, upon creation, *vayar Elohim ki-tov* (and g_d saw that it was good).

They called the project *Adamah*, from the root Adam, and meaning earth or dust. Adamah combines food production and education, hosting tours, discussions, work days, and an immersive residential program. Lovingly called “Adamahniks,” the young people who come for three-month stays live and work in cohorts of about twelve.

Adamahniks spend each morning together chanting lines from the traditional Jewish liturgy and in silent meditation. They then split up for chores—milking goats, schlepping food waste from the dining hall to the compost yard, and so on. The day's remaining work is varied: perhaps harvesting kale for the farm's CSA program, boxing eggplant for donation to folks experiencing food insecurity, offering farm tours to retreat center guests, or packing thousands of pounds of salted cabbage into barrels destined for sauerkraut jars to be peddled on the lower east side of Manhattan.

Hop onto a bicycle at Isabella Freedman and turn right on Johnson Road, and you'll arrive a mile later at a field of rich, alluvial soil that was donated to Adamah by local landowners and that provided abundant vegetables for Adamah's first decade.

The Hollenbeck River, often called the “most mikvahed river in North America,” surrounds the field on three sides. *Mikvah* means immersion and involves three dunks to mark a transition, such as from the work week into the Shabbat rest that begins at dusk on Fridays. Friday afternoon Adamah work sessions are a frenzy of labor, an embrace of the capacity to create and then a collective, grinding, songful halt. Mikvah in a cold, moving water body is a singular way to transition from the hustle of raising sustenance to Shabbat's “palace in time” with its space to notice the world as it is rather than as one might wish it to be.



Here, Adamah has borne its most stark manifestation of a changing climate. With increasing frequency, the Hollenbeck rises to engulf the farmland in swamp. After three consecutive years of flooding, when fish swam among drowned seedlings, the riverside field was retired from crop production. Every autumn since, on the seventh day of the Sukkot holiday, Adamahniks have whacked their way through deep-rooted wildflowers and brush to form a circle on the banks of the Hollenbeck and recite an ancient Hoshana Rabbah prayer for “the right amount of rain,” with a resonance that synagogue liturgy could never achieve.

Today, Adamahniks farm on Beebe Hill, where the reduced flood risk and south-facing slope make the land more suitable to long-term thinking. The scene comes to life with the seeds and stories that have grown from it:

Meredith Cohen, overcome with inspiration after schlepping pungent bins from the dining hall with cohort-mate Molly Zimmerman; the two standing atop a ripe compost pile reading poetry, foreshadowing the Jewish community farm they would start together in North Carolina years later.

Z’ev Schuman burying a goat, quoting Rabbi Simcha Bunam of Pzhysha:

**In my right pocket I carry
a note with the words, 'For
my sake was the world
created,' and in my left, 'I am
but dust and ashes.'**

Liana Kallman biking down Beebe Hill Road with a backpack full of beets and turnips to make her family’s traditional Syrian pickle recipe.



Laura Evonne Steinman harvesting wildflowers before Shabbat with Jewish women in their eighties, several of them survivors of the Holocaust, explaining that the blooms are part of Adamah’s practice of leaving one-seventh of the land wild in honor of Shmita, the biblical fallowing cycle.

Shamu Sadeh, one of the original founders of Adamah, kneeling with a group of Adamahniks around an empty hole, preparing to plant the pair of chestnuts where we began our tour. Surrounded by a sense of grounded belonging as they sing the words of their ancestors, acknowledging that the ground before them is the unceded land of the Mahican people. This son of Hungarian Jewish refugees holding in his hands a young chestnut tree, a majestic symbol of Indigenous abundance and colonial devastation, sitting in the irreconcilable discomfort and humble unknowing between diasporism and colonization. Loosening the roots before burying them and reciting the Shehecheyanu, ancient blessing of gratitude for a unique moment.



UPAYA ZEN CENTER

DATE CONCEIVED / SINCE WHEN

June 2010

WHERE

Santa Fe, New Mexico

WHAT

a half-acre Buddhist garden tended by Upaya residents and staff

MISSION/PURPOSE/GUIDING PRINCIPLES

To cultivate strong community; to educate about Tewa growing practices; to embody spiritual teachings in the land we inhabit

KYLE

Sandberg

In June 2020, we at Upaya Zen Center, a Buddhist community in Santa Fe, New Mexico, seeded our garden in the tradition of the Tewa who have lived and farmed along the valley of the Rio Grande in Northern New Mexico for hundreds of years. Eighteen of us, residents and priests, spent two days at the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, clearing the ground, tending to the soil, and planting seed into earth.

Roshi Joan Halifax, Abbot of Upaya, often asks us to be strong to serve. This strength, I believe, is centered around a lived experience of our interconnectedness. Working in the garden as a community was that for me. I remember all of our hands in the soil collectively. It was a gift, especially in this time of pandemic and quarantine. Clouds covered the sky both days. Planting squash, beans, and corn like the Tewa do feels like an acknowledgment of our relationship to the land and its history of relating to people. Within that attentiveness, we noticed the sacred nature of the place we found ourselves in. Neil, a resident at Upaya, played his flute, the music of the Pagans, enlivening us as we split into teams led by two priests, Chuck and Kozan, and resident, Mali. All of us—squash kings, bean masters, corn queens—worked together.

Late summer in New Mexico is traditionally monsoon season, but 2020 was dry, with only a few afternoons of dark clouds and torrential rains. Despite this, things grew: the amaranth, quinoa, tobacco, squash, beans, and corn. Life surges on, always. Admittedly this has been a different type of season than most, as we have lived many months of cloistered quarantine together as a community.

It is an interesting thing to construct a little place of corn and other crops in the middle of our zen community. It is a vulnerable place. The squash did not do so well. There was a day in September when it snowed and the winds gusted; a few of the corn stalks fell. There are packs of coyotes that roam the Sangre de Cristos; at night I can sometimes hear them eating and howling. I pictured them at the fence of the garden, pawing at the chain links. Despite my imaginings, we managed to cultivate little bounties. During one lunch, we served some of the early harvest blue Tewa corn. Joel, a resident, said to the community, “I was smiling to myself the entire time I was enjoying the blue corn I was given, the first-ever crop I planted with my own hands that I was able to eat.”



One of the rewards that come from this practice of stewarding the land is the story that the garden provides as it progresses through the growing season, and the teachings that come from this. There is a subtle clarity in the land. The life of the garden is not something that one can turn away from, leave untended. The consequences being simple and plain: death, a poor harvest, unwanted critters, weak roots. In this place of vulnerability, we are unmasked. Our lives are made simple and plain.

The constructed garden consists of a series of mutual agreements that make me think of the agreements we make with each other when we enter a place of spiritual practice. A place that requires respect, care, protection. And on the other hand, a place that is intrinsically involved in its—our—shared world regardless of the constructed barriers, because the world is enveloped into everything, as the deer and the insects eating leaves and squash remind me.

It reminds me of the tension of practice. We chant the Heart Sutra most mornings, which describes the bridge between the relative and the absolute; form and emptiness; the small self and the large self. There is tension between these two realms; the small self and the larger universal self. Sensei Zenju Earthlyn Manuel writes about the large self:⁶³

We are not capable of being 'un-embodied' Selves, nor are we meant to be. We cannot become the Self that we cannot touch, that does not suffer, that has no name, no color, no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue. No matter how many labels we drop, we cannot become that Self.

The garden teaches me that one can not resolve this tension. A garden is an unresolvable place. It can only be tended to, believed in. In the same way, this larger, empty, unbounded self is the nature we have faith in, a shared nature to which we chant and bow.

We bear witness to life's hum. The ridgeline between joy and sorrow. The faith that Nirvana lies on the other edge of this experience. The process of seed germination, to root system, to stem, to flower, to wilt. The complicated ecosystem the plant inhabits. The seasons cycling through it. In the Zendo, we put the landscape onto the altar as best we can. This morning I look and see wild pea, juniper berry, and purple aster collected in a vase next to the Avalokiteshvara statue of compassion.

Perhaps land stewardship teaches us how to hold our complicated questions: How do I express life authentically and honestly? How do I live in the middle of the unknown, the things falling apart and coming together, like the seasons cycling through again and again?

The constructed garden consists of a series of mutual agreements that make me think of the agreements we make with each other when we enter a place of spiritual practice.

In autumn, our garden turns tender and fragile. The sunflowers have browned. In the morning there is a skinny fawn snacking on amaranth leaves. Our world is tender and fragile. We are mixed up in it. When I step out of meditation in the evening, I look at the setting sun which has been blood orange ever since the wildfires took hold of the West Coast. I think there and here. I think of our fully enveloped world made up of continuous harm as well as continuous healing. In our complicated situation, there is always a vibrancy. A sense of love, maybe. Love that we feel for each other and this land. The garden serves as a context of practice, teaching us to tend to what needs tending to and to celebrate what needs celebrating. At the end of October, we harvest the last of the corn all together, and make a special meal.

APPENDIX: CONTRIBUTORS, REVIEWERS, & INTERVIEWEES

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