



Providential SEEDS



By Dale Keffer

An idea had been germinating in the minds of the Providence Mennonite Church leadership for about a year, and in the spring of 2010 it came to fruition.

We wanted to connect with our community people in a meaningful way that would provide more of a bond than just inviting them to a service. A number of circumstances made it possible for a unique approach for outreach that brought the community to our doorstep.

and cantaloupes. The experience of working together in this way provided a different venue of fellowship that sparked informal and spontaneous conversations we would never have had among ourselves otherwise. Good things were happening to us as a church before the first produce ever ripened.

Our plan was not as carefully thought out as it might have been, but we had never done anything like this before and did not know of anyone who had. There was no road-



Matthew Miller, boy with a hoe!



Dale Keffer pitches in.



Joyce Thomas and Jessica Hershberger, hard at work.



Joel Miller and Jessica Hershberger work together.

Food, and especially free food, is attractive to most of us. When that is combined with the current economic conditions it makes it all the more attractive. God planted a seed in our midst that grew into a community garden located on a property we own adjacent to our church property.

Beginning in the spring, we cancelled our normal Wednesday evening meetings and asked everyone to come and work in the garden. We tilled the soil and planted a variety of vegetables, which included potatoes, lima beans, green beans, peppers, okra, tomatoes, carrots, beets, radishes, squash, cucumbers, and eggplant, as well as melons

map to go by and we weren't sure what to expect. We had this rather vague idea that we would produce the food and give it away to anyone who wanted it. The goal was not so much to feed the poor as it was to introduce ourselves to the community in an unconventional and memorable way.

From planting to harvest time there was no need to worry about how we would distribute the food, since we didn't have any food to distribute yet. We knew we needed to come up with a plan, but with nothing ripe, it was easy to put off developing a plan. The first Wednesday evening we were able to harvest any produce it was such a small amount that we gave it all to a neighbor. The following

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Wednesday evening we had enough produce that we were forced to address the question of distribution.

It was getting dark, time was running out, and we really didn't know what to do. The general feeling in the air was "Now what?" We decided to place the produce on the tailgate of a pickup truck and park it by the street in front of the church. Cardboard signs were hurriedly made with magic markers, and volunteers stood on the sidewalk and on the edge of the street advertising "Free Veggies." What happened next was almost unbelievable. Cars began turning into

and brought a nice looking professional sign back to us the next Wednesday evening, free of charge. We used the professional sign but we never abandoned the cardboard and magic marker signs. There seemed to be something about those handmade signs that was so in keeping with what we were doing.

The people who stopped by ranged from retirees, to housewives with their children in tow, to young people who looked like they needed all the help they could get. All were welcome and there was no limit as to how much they could take with them. Some folks really didn't know how to prepare some of the produce, and our ladies gave out information to anyone who asked. The atmosphere was one of joy and happiness, along with a good dose of incredulous inquiry. A typical question was: "Okay, what's the catch?" The answer was "There is no catch. Please, help yourself. Here, I'll hold the bag for you." A typical offer was: "Please let me give you some money!" and the answer was always: "This is free. We don't want any money. We just want to get to know you."

A side street joins the main thoroughfare right at the entrance to the church parking lot where we set up shop



Produce coming in.



Mmmm, peppers.



Pastor Jason Miller with the "Free Veggies" sign.



After the harvest, another kind of harvest – distributing the vegetables.

the parking lot one after another and in no time at all, all the produce was gone. In subsequent weeks it rarely took longer than 30 to 45 minutes of hawking our wares until there was nothing left to hawk.

Our plan now began to evolve as we gained some experience in what we were doing. As a practical matter, we made sure we had plastic bags available for everyone to use, and we produced a brochure giving service times and an invitation to attend our services. A brochure was placed in each bag and went home with the veggies. One fellow who stopped in was so impressed with what was happening that he wanted to help us out. He was a professional sign painter

every Wednesday night. Cars coming out of the side street have to stop, and it was a rare person who wouldn't smile at us, give us a thumbs up or call out a blessing to us, even if

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they weren't stopping themselves. Many testimonies were shared with us about the "good thing" we were doing.

It is impossible to tell just how much good came from this experience. Some things are immeasurable, such as what happened to the church itself when we connected with each other on a different level than we usually do, and the sense of joy in being able to help someone out. It was largely a seed sowing experience this first year, and it remains to be seen what God will do with it. We believe it to have been important enough that there is no question that come spring, we will be back in the garden again.

We have learned a few practical things along the way. We are blessed with a master gardener who knows everything about plant life and gardening that is worth knowing. Someone with that knowledge is essential to the success of this type of program. Not everyone knows just when or even how to plant. Just how far apart do you place the seeds and the rows and just when do you pick the stuff? Underground produce is impervious to the squirrels and rabbits, and it is better to stick with the less labor intensive veggies. Instead of having recycled plastic grocery bags on hand for everyone to use, it would be better to have our own grocery bags imprinted with the church's information to give to everyone.

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Providence Mennonite's community garden facilitated many good conversations about what we believe; it also provided an opportunity for us to put a face on our church that the community could identify. Many people stereotype Mennonites, and we wanted the community to know us through firsthand interaction, instead of drawing their impressions from what others say or from their ideas about our tradition.

We have discovered that our Mennonite heritage/culture has equipped us to carry out Kingdom building in this unique way. By God's grace we plan on planting seeds again next year, in the garden and in the souls of men, women and children.

BB



SNOWED IN

Well, this is a snowfall that's beating the band!
Still at it! Eight inches already on hand.
A very good day for remaining at home
Inside looking out at the albino land.

"Old Rufus", my woodburner's doing his thing.
I load in the logs and they purr and they sing,
A cozy, low song that is more like a sigh.
I rock alongside with a slow dip and swing.

Nowhere can I travel: my lane is snowed in.
There's not any project I'd like to begin,
Or either to finish, or further it on.
My sense of ambition is woefully thin.

My sloth, I suppose, should give feelings of guilt.
This do-lessness isn't the way Rome was built!
But guilt would take effort. I think I prefer
Just to cuddle up more in this faded old quilt.

We're saved "not by works", I recall with content.
My penchant for working, wherever it went,
Is not here residing with me at this hour.
For days like today, "Grace Amazing" was meant.

Lazily written by Lois Kempton, February 9, 2010