



## A Little Dirt and a Lot of Love



Christmas time is filled with good opportunities for churches to reach out in various ways to their communities. Many great outreaches happen this time of year such as gift drives, food drives, or adopting families. For one of our partner churches, their new community outreach will lie dormant until spring. Here's a look back at a different sort of practical Christianity from 2018.

Six years ago, Capital Christian Fellowship started a community garden with help from dedicated members of the church who regularly tended it. A few years ago, God brought a renewed vision for reconciliation to this urban D.C. church, and with it, bigger plans for the garden on its premises.

The garden is far from the only program running at Capital Christian, CCF for short. The church has long placed a high value on community outreach with an estimated 200 families from the community engaged with the church in various assistance programs. Akeia Had-dox-Rossiter serves as one of three CCF Pastors. She oversees the outreach ministries like their food pantry. According to Akeia, "One of the values of the food pantry is that there is an opportunity for [the guests] to check in," spiritually and otherwise when they come each week. They began to see a need for reconciliation work there, as well as in their congregation, "and it felt like we needed to move." So in 2015, they made a commitment that the next year everything grown in the garden would be given to the food pantry guests.

"It was miraculous," Akeia says, "The garden grew the most beautiful vegetables." They would encourage food pantry guests to go into the garden and literally pick their own food. For many, this was their first experience seeing food in its most natural state. One woman giggled with delight as she pulled green onions straight from the earth. The garden was not only providing new experiences, but as Akeia explains, "We started to see community growing around the garden." People would talk about how they use vegetables, sharing recipes and a bit of life with each other.

Over the next few years there was another gradual shift. More help was needed to take care of the garden, and the church felt God leading them into further restoration work. Through a grant, the church was able to start a program based around horticultural therapy, and last year, Growing Roots was born.



Horticultural therapy, put very simply, is using the process of plant care with guidance from a licensed professional as a means of therapy or rehabilitation.\* CCF explained Growing Roots in their project narrative like this: "Participants receive hands on learning about gardening, with an objective of gaining appreciation and understanding for the earth and the resources that it provides, as well as our role in caring for it... Throughout the initiative participants will be encouraged to share their stories of reconciliation, areas of growth, revelation, change, and failure.

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CCF partnered their horticultural therapy program with Melwood, an organization working with people with special needs. Two horticultural therapists and a certified master gardener lead classes. Each week, students from Melwood and others from the food pantry or surrounding community would learn about soil, bugs, plant care, and everything in between. They would also spend a good portion of each class tending the garden and learning along the way. Participants even receive kits to start their own gardens at home.



Not only would those in the program have the benefits of the garden classes, but those enrolled in the program would also have access to a number of other church services including pastoral care, group care, therapy, immigration services, language services, and classes on finance, and mental health awareness. Beyond all that, Growing Roots was about connecting people to God. The program became far more than just a service, for many of these gardeners it became church. For some, it was the first church they had known in years.

At the end of season celebration, one from the Melwood group said it had been seven years since he'd been to church, and this was the first church he had ever felt welcome in. Another young lady, age 23, is in a wheelchair. Ordinarily she wouldn't have the opportunity to garden, but planks and raised beds make it possible for her to join in as well. A 76-year-old man from the food pantry put it best when he said that the garden is practical Christianity.

At the end of the year, the students, or partner gardeners as they are called, were left with far more than new practical knowledge about gardening or finances. They had

found community, a body of believers to work alongside and share life struggles with, pastors who prayed with them, and friends to celebrate with. God clearly had a direction when he prompted the creation of an urban garden six years ago. Like growing plants, it was a slow process, but CCF is excited for how God will use the garden in the future. Next spring, this portion of the body of

Christ will once again reach out to their community over a pile of dirt as they sow love as well as vegetables. As God tends the soil of all of our hearts, we hope and pray with them for a good harvest.

*To learn more about Horticultural Therapy, visit the American Horticultural Therapy Association at [www.ahta.org](http://www.ahta.org). ✚*

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## **A Word from the Executive Director: Christmas Without the Safety Harness**



Managed. Controlled. Nice. Easy. No surprises. Great naps. Repeatable. The same food. All expectations met but still empty inside. I realize that my approach to Christmas can be way off the mark. Holidays are a kind of liturgy for us, they reconnect us and help us feel rooted. When the carefully scripted elements are off, I can get upset.

About a year ago, my mother passed away. This resulted in the end of a tradition of family gatherings that alternated between Christmas and Thanksgiving each year. As the youngest of six, this tradition started when I was quite young. As the only one without grandchildren, it's ending while my children are still at home. This Christmas will be the first Christmas in 50 years without a planned gathering with extended family. But last Thanksgiving something beautiful happened. And it happened again this Thanksgiving. The table got larger. Strangers became friends, and friends became family.

The first Christmas was not the list of words and phrases I used to start this article. Instead it was dangerous. Out of control. Hard. Full of surprises. Sleepless nights. Strange places and foods. Neighbors with barnyard manners. This Christmas, take the time to make things unsafe and unscripted. How will you open your table to something more and something unexpected? If you do, I guarantee you'll be able to worship the child Jesus in way you never have before. – *John Troyer*