GROWING MISSION WITH COMMUNITY FOOD

A PRACTICAL RESOURCE FOR CHURCH CONGREGATIONS

O'Connor Community Garden
Photo: Noel Haberecht

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1 INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNITY FOOD INITIATIVES

"Food and food ways are inseparable from an understanding of the mission to bring about God's kingdom of justice and peace here on Earth."

Ellen Teague (2010), Vocation for Justice, editorial, Vol 24, No 2.

1.1 Food and the Kingdom of God

Jesus loved food!

Sumptuous wedding banquets (Matt 22) and feasts (Luke 14) were, to him, rich metaphors for God's kingdom. He ate with rich and poor, respectable and sinner (Luke 11, 14). So central to Jesus' ministry was food, eating, and the community it created, that his enemies had enough ammunition to accuse him of being a glutton and a drunkard (Matt 11, Luke 7).

Jesus used meals to teach, to challenge, and especially to show that God wanted those that others rejected (Luke 7, 19). His parables and teachings are full of the imagery of food growing and harvesting – vines, fig trees, grains, seeds, wheat, weeds and more.

When Jesus taught the crowds of 4000 and 5000, he made sure they were fed, and turned that feeding into an opportunity for more teaching (Mark 6, 8). The first act to distinguish the sheep from the goats was feeding people (Mat 25), and feeding the hungry was James' first example of true faith (James 2). Jesus was inspired by Isaiah, who taught that true fasting was to share food with the hungry (Isa 58). And he was concerned not only about justice in terms of eating, but also about the accumulation of land and agricultural surpluses by wealthy landowners (Luke 12)[1].

Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, we recall the final meal which Jesus shared with his disciples. We come to the table to which all are invited to participate in the God's kingdom of giving and receiving, with thanksgiving and recognition of the good gifts of creation. We partake in the body of Christ – and we *become* the body of Christ – experiencing and working for the reconciliation of all things. Christian ethicist Michael Northcott argues that, in a broken world where over a billion people hungry, where land is concentrated in the hands of the few, and where agricultural practises are increasingly damaging Earth's ecosystems, all Christian food practices should strive to witness to this reconciliation.[2]

The Last Supper, photo taken in Cairo, Al Qahirah, by Kudumomo, www.flickr.com/photos/kudumomo/with/738177343

1.2 About Community Food Initiatives

Our food system in Australia and across the world is in crisis.[3] For example, in Australia:

- Large inputs of energy, water and other materials to produce, transport and store food are resulting in overexploitation of natural resources, land degradation and biodiversity loss, and are a significant contributor to climate change

[1] Northcott (2007) "Eucharistic Eating: The moral economy of food", www.justice-and-peace.org.uk/documents/moraleconomyeucharist.pdf

[2] Northcott (2007)

[3] See Julian Cribb (2010) "The Coming Famine", CSIRO Publishing, for a thorough discussion of the national and global situation. See also Insights, November 2010, for an overview, www.insights.uca.org.au

- Limits to the planet's natural resources, nutrient losses from the soil, peak oil and phosphorus, climate change, and water shortages in turn threaten the viability of business-as-usual agriculture in many parts of our country
- There is a high prevalence of obesity, and large numbers of households experience food insecurity[4]
- Meat consumption is around three times the global average, with detrimental impacts for the health of Australians, ecosystem health, animal welfare and the global climate[5]
- Households throw away over $5bn of food each year[6]
- The levels of market concentration in the grocery sector are at an all-time high – Coles and Woolworths control 55-60% of the sector[7], and it is widely reported that as little as five cents in the dollar spent on fresh produce in supermarkets goes to farmers
- Three farmers commit suicide[8] and eight walk off their farms[9] every week

Local produce market, St George's Uniting Church Eden. Photo: Judith Dalton.

In this context, a plethora of community food initiatives (in which communities work to feed themselves, and which collectively are known as the "community food system") are beginning to flourish in cities and towns across Australia.

Russ Grayson of the Sydney Food Fairness Alliance clusters these many initiatives into three groups[10]:

1. Community enterprise: where communities set up their own organisations (e.g. food buying groups), to obtain the food that they want.
2. Small businesses: such as green grocers, farmers markets, and organic food stores, organic home delivery services.
3. Grow it yourself: where consumers grow food for their own consumption in backyards, community gardens, and on kerbsides/verges.

Community food initiatives range from the spontaneous and informal, to the structured and highly organised. The boundaries between them are not hard and fast. For example, community gardens may also host farmers markets. These many food initiatives have the following characteristics in common:

- A re-localisation or re-regionalisation of food production and consumption – serving local areas at small scale

[4] Food insecurity exists when people lack choice, fear running out of food, or are forced to make major changes in their preferred eating habits due to economic constraints. See "Understanding Food Insecurity: Why families go hungry in an affluent society", Sydney Food Fairness Alliance discussion sheet, August 2007, and also "Obesity and Overweight: The hidden role of food insecurity", Sydney Food Fairness Alliance discussion sheet, February 2009, www.sydneyfoodfairness.org.au

[5] See "Meat-Free Day" pages at www.arrcc.org.au

[6] David Baker, Josh Fear and Richard Denniss (2009) "What a Waste: An analysis of household expenditure on food", Australia Institute policy brief no.6, www.tai.org.au

[7] Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (2008) Report of the ACCC inquiry into the competitiveness of retail prices for standard groceries, chapter 3, www.accc.gov.au. See also "The Beast File: Woolies and Coles (HUNGRY BEAST)", www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1et_HBmLYw

[8] Andrew N. Page and Lyn J. Fragar (2002) Suicide in Australian farming, 1988–1997. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, Vol 24, No 1, pp.81–85.

[9] ABARE (2009) Australian Commodities Statistics 2009, Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Canberra, 2009, www.abare.gov.au

[10] Russ Grayson (2010) Cities, Food and Permaculture, http://pacific-edge.info

- Acknowledgment of the relationships between food consumers and food producers, and between people and the natural world
- Relationship building and enhanced cooperation at the local level

The potential of community food initiatives is considerable. What is also clear is that they are not just about caring for the environment, nor about supporting small farmers, or even about health concerns regarding conventionally grown food. Community food initiatives are also about the hospitality and relationships that come with the sharing food. In proactively rebuilding connections with food growing and supply, people are rebuilding their communities.

1.3 Involvement of Church Congregations in Community Food Initiatives

Churches are a part of the growth of community food initiatives. At Uniting Churches in NSW and the ACT alone, there are at least 10 "grow it yourself" initiatives at various stages of development, and at least one food buying group. We have opportunities to be more strongly involved – indeed, as we believe humans are called to till and keep the earth (to serve and protect God's garden, Gen 2), we should be striving to lead the way.

Cooma Community Garden, Cooma Uniting Church. Photo: www.monarocommunities.org.au/coomagardens.html

Church-based community food initiatives are vibrant in a broad sense and represent a reinvigoration of the mission of congregations within their local communities. They:

- Draw people together around a common purpose, from both within and beyond the church (e.g. individuals, community groups, schools, local councils are often involved)
- Enable churches to extend and facilitate hospitality (e.g. through sharing food, meals and skills)
- Provide opportunities for the mutual sharing of spirituality, motivation and ecological concern
- Involve education and action relating to the growing of organic, seasonal and local food, healthy eating, food preparation, biodiversity protection, water conservation, waste management
- Provide opportunities for building appreciation of food issues facing regions, Australia and the world, and thus for building solidarity beyond the immediate locality
- Are socially inclusive, with cross-generational and cross-cultural potential, and can be especially targeted towards strengthening skills, capabilities and well-being among marginalised groups
- Encourage creativity and often involve artists
- Build consciousness of what it means to be part of God's healing and renewal of creation
- Are a grass roots contribution towards sustainable food production and consumption in Australia

1.4 About this Resource

This resource has been produced to encourage and support church congregations across the NSW/ACT Synod of the Uniting Church to embark on community food initiatives. The majority of the information contained herein is also relevant to congregations outside the Synod and outside the Uniting Church. The resource:

1. Describes three types of community food initiatives that are already happening at Uniting Church congregations across this Synod – community gardens, food buying groups, and community supported agriculture – and which directly involve people beyond the congregation[11]

[11] We don't include initiatives such Oz Harvest and Food Bank food rescue services, which collect donations of food from those who have excess (e.g. supermarkets, food wholesalers, caterers and restaurants), and distribute it to charities who serve the needy – some of which are connected with church congregations. Food rescue services have clear social and environmental benefits, including the diversion of what would otherwise be waste to landfill. However, they are further

2. Provides guidance as to how churches might get involved in these sorts of initiatives
3. Gives suggestions for other initiatives such as garden share, food swaps and grow zones

Further supporting resources can also be found at www.unitingearthweb.org.au/explore/Community-Food/, including:

- Case studies and photographs of existing community food initiatives at churches
- Sample documents, including documents relating to the governance of community gardens

Fruit and veggie boxes are packed at Springwood
Photo: Koleta McDonald

This resource has been prepared by the Uniting Earthweb Group (UEG). Uniting Earthweb is a network of Uniting Church people within NSW and the ACT who work for a greater connection between ecology and Christian faith and practice. The UEG is a small group of Uniting Church members who meet regularly to help support the development of Uniting Earthweb, and includes staff from UnitingCare and the Board of Mission.

The UEG aims to provide ongoing assistance to churches embarking on community food initiatives. If you are making use of this resource, please contact us (details on the contents page) – we may be able to provide phone support. We would also appreciate your feedback on this resource, and would be grateful to share your learnings from your community food project with other churches.

removed from food growing than the initiatives we consider here. The latter bring food producers and consumers closer together, and have the potential to drive structural changes in food production and supply.

2 COMMUNITY GARDENS

"To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation... when we do this knowingly, lovingly, skilfully, reverently, it is a sacrament." Wendell Berry (2010), in Michael Schut et al, eds, Food and Faith: Justice, Joy and Daily Bread, Morehouse Publishing, p.9

2.1 What are Community Gardens?

Planting at the PermaPatch Community Garden, South Chatswood Uniting Church. Photo: www.permapatch.org.au

Community gardens are places in cities and towns where people come together to grow food, often without use of synthetic fertilisers and/or pest and weed killers (called organic gardening). As well as spaces for food growing (e.g. individual garden plots, communal garden plots, fruit trees), and associated facilities such as compositing, water harvesting and a seed raising area, community gardens often include:

- Community art (e.g. mosaics, sculptures)
- Places for indigenous and native plants, flowers and ornamentals
- Spaces for socialising and celebration (e.g. outdoor seating and eating facilities)
- Spaces for solitude and reflection
- Places for education (e.g. outdoor classrooms)
- Animals (e.g. chickens, bees)

2.2 What are the Benefits of Community Gardens?

The environmental benefits of local (and often organic) food production are just some of the positives of community gardens. Research has shown that there are manifold others, including[12]:

- Physical and mental health benefits from increased access to/consumption of fresh food, exercise, close contact with natural processes, and participation in community activities
- Environmental education, habitat for wildlife, and green spaces in urban areas
- Enhanced community networks, reduced social isolation, and strengthened relationships across diversity
- Cross-cultural learning and sharing
- Reduced crime and vandalism
- Reduced costs for managing open space

2.3 Why Are Churches Involved in Community Gardening?

Churches across Australia, from various denominations, are involved in community gardening. At the time of writing, there are approximately ten Uniting Churches in NSW and the ACT which host/run/cooperate on community garden projects, with more in the pipeline. Churches have entered into such projects for a variety of overlapping reasons (see Box 1):

- To build relationships with and across the local community
- To make responsible and creative use of church land
- To care for God's creation in a hands-on practical way
- To serve and equip the needy and marginalised people in the community, such as those who are isolated, unemployed and/or facing food insecurity
- To respond to requests from people who were looking for a place to site their community garden

[12] A current and comprehensive bibliography of community gardens research is available at http://communitygarden.org.au/bibliography

- To build relationships across generations and cultures
- To invigorate their church's mission, purpose and profile
- To connect together witness and service, right there at the place of worship

Box 1: Examples of why churches are involved in community gardening

Cooma Community Garden
A couple of years ago, a group of people in Cooma were looking for a site to establish the community garden. They approached the church, and after several meetings with the garden group, the church council agreed to host the garden.

Far West Indigenous Church
The Far West Indigenous Church (UAICC) in Broken Hill, in collaboration with Bush Church Aid and Robinson College, developed its garden and on-site horticulture courses to provide an activity to alleviate boredom, which is a factor in the problems of substance abuse in the local community. The church was looking for a practical way to share the love of Christ.

South Sydney Uniting Church
The Eden Garden at South Sydney Uniting Church was established several decades ago, and has served various purposes over the years. It is now run by the Luncheon Club, an HIV/AIDS support group, and provides activity, company and fresh food for people living with HIV/AIDS.

St Luke's Uniting Church Belmont
St Luke's Uniting Church Belmont is starting a community garden to build relationships in and with the local community, to do something practical to care for the Earth, and to provide new opportunities for environmental education of church members and the broader community.

2.4 How Do We Get Started?

Establishing and developing a community garden is a considerable undertaking. But it is one that brings tremendous benefits and rewards, as the case studies at www.unitingearthweb.org.au attest.

There are some terrific resources to help groups that are starting and/or wanting to improve the running of their community garden, including:

- Brief resources: "Tips for Starting a Garden", and a "Getting Started Checklist" are available at: www.communitygarden.org.au. This website is a one-stop shop for resources and support for community gardens
- A longer resource: Thomas, F (2008) "Getting started in community gardening", City of Sydney, Sydney. Available at: www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au
- A comprehensive resource: Claire Nettle (2010) "Growing Community: Starting and nurturing community gardens", Adelaide: Health SA, Government of South Australia and CANH Association Inc. Available at www.canh.asn.au

Blessing of the animals, Eden Garden, South Sydney Uniting Church. Photo: Ali Blogg

These resources emphasise the importance of a variety of considerations, including:

- Establishing a committed core group which is willing and able to drive the project

- Cultivating community interest and involvement in the project right from the start, and on an ongoing basis – with a particular attention to different cultural groups, people with special needs, and marginalised groups
- Using strong participatory processes in developing a vision for and a design of the garden
- Thoroughly researching the project – including by accessing resources such as those on the Australian City Farms and Community Gardens website, and by visiting other community gardens in the area for ideas and inspiration
- Developing a clear system for managing the garden (including e.g. internal communication and governance)

The abovementioned materials have been consulted in preparing this resource. The aim is not to duplicate these materials here. For example, very helpful advice is given in the materials regarding publicity and promotions, garden design and conflict resolution. Rather, here we provide guidance that is tailored particularly to churches.

2.5 What Sort of Organisational Structure Should We Employ at Our Community Garden?

There are as many ways to run community gardens as there are community gardens. However, there are several broad models employed by Uniting Churches across NSW/ACT, as shown in Box 3. The choice of model depends on the particular context e.g. capacity of the church, needs and interests of the local community.

2.6 What is the Scope for Building Community Partnerships?

Community gardens are good at strengthening communities through developing partnerships among community groups and organisations. Uniting Churches have collaborated with a range of groups in their local areas in developing and running their community gardens, including:

- Local councils
- Schools and other educational establishments e.g. TAFE
- Mission Australia
- Aged care facilities
- Permaculture groups
- Artists and musicians
- Local farmers
- Aboriginal groups
- Other churches, Christian groups and agencies
- Other local community gardens

See Box 2 to learn about partnerships at St George's Uniting Church Eden "Garden of Eden".

The first earth is shovelled in the "Feed My People" community veggie garden at Moree Uniting Church. Photo: Thea Buchan

Box 2: St George's Uniting Church Eden's "Garden of Eden" cultivates rich community relationships

The Garden of Eden Community Garden is a ten year mission project at St George's Uniting Church Eden. Among the people involved in the project have been schools, artists, musicians, the Koori community, local farmers (the garden hosts a monthly local produce market), and people out of work who come for work placements organised in conjunction with Mission Australia. Community development is central to this project, and the groups are involved in the visioning, development and maintenance of the garden. Through the heritage walk collaborative project, the congregation is working with people from four other gardens in Eden. And the church has even hosted a visit from Watoto Ugandan Children's Choir, who got in contact because they heard about the garden. In a town with no other community centre, the church is becoming a hub for community life.

Box 3: Organisational models of church involvement in community gardens

Model	Church land, church run	Church land, others run	Church in partnership	Existing garden
Description	The church runs the community garden, which is on church land. The church has oversight of garden development and operations. People/groups beyond the church are involved in gardening, and to a greater or lesser extent in the organisation and management of the garden (e.g. on the garden committee).	The community garden is on church land, but run by a group external to the church. There may be greater or lesser church involvement in that group – minimally a liaison person. In some cases, people from within and outside the congregation may participate equally in garden development and management.	The church works in partnership with other individuals and groups to develop a garden that is not on church land.	The church joins an existing community garden, which is not on church land.
Particular church needs	• Capacity within the church to initiate and sustain a community garden • A clear set of garden rules/gardeners agreement. See www.unitingearthweb.org.au for a sample • Good community engagement and community development processes to ensure that the garden builds interest, involvement, and ownership in the broader community	• A clear MOU between the church and the garden group. See a sample at www.unitingearthweb.org.au. The group will generally need their own public liability insurance. A template MOU for external groups' use of church land is available from Uniting Resources, www.unitingresources.org.au/ps • Minimally, a church member to act as a liaison person between the garden group and the church council • Efforts to build relationships between the congregation and the garden group.	• Capacity within the church to initiate and sustain a community garden in partnership with others • Good community engagement and community development processes to ensure that the garden builds interest, involvement, and ownership • Land and public liability insurance	• Interest within the church in community gardening
Example	The "Feed My People" community vegetable garden is a new project of Moree Uniting Church. It aims to building meaningful relationships between and among the church and different parts of the Moree community, particularly the marginalised and needy. The garden is managed by a church committee, and plots will be allocated to individuals and groups both inside and outside of the church. The committee has approached groups e.g. Fairview Nursing Home and Moree College.	A member at O'Connor Uniting Church was interested in establishing a community garden on two old tennis courts next to the church. He decided to approach Canberra Organic Growers Society (COGs), which run a number of community gardens in the area. After meeting together, the church and COGs decided to proceed. COGs manages the garden, there is a MOU between the church and COGs, and a liaison person who is both on the church council and the garden committee.	"Sustaining Our Suburbs" is a community partnership of Permaculture Hunter and Adamstown Uniting Church, helping low-income people to grow organic food. The project involves, in part, establishing new community gardens at facilities such as schools, community centres, and childcare centres.	Maroubra Junction Uniting Church is a member of the Randwick Community Organic Garden.

2.7 How Can We Fund Our Community Garden?

Horticulture students at the Far West Indigenous Church's garden in Broken Hill. Photo: Neville Naden

The costs of establishing and running community gardens can be minimised by:

- Recycling waste materials for garden construction (e.g. waste bricks and wood) and for organic matter (e.g. green waste from your local council or garden business). This is also environmentally beneficial
- Where possible, making use of skills in the community rather than employing consultants – this also helps with building relationships and skills in the community
- Seeking cash or in-kind sponsorship from local businesses (e.g. a local nursery may provide seedlings at a discount)
- Taking things slowly to allow low-cost options to be pursued

Nonetheless, all gardens do require funding. Things that may incur a cost include:

- Printing of promotional materials
- Construction materials (e.g. for raised beds, pergolas etc)
- Water harvesting and irrigation equipment
- Toolshed and tools
- Organic material to establish raised garden beds
- A selection of books for a small resource library for gardeners
- Staffing costs (e.g. a consultant to help with garden design)
- Ongoing costs (e.g. sourcing new plants, manure, mains water consumption etc) can be covered by charging fees for garden membership.
- Public liability insurance is a significant cost for many gardens. An advantage for church-run gardens at church facilities is that they should be covered by the church's existing insurance.

It is important to note that community gardens may actually result in some cost savings. For example, if your community garden is to displace a lawn, mowing costs will be reduced/eliminated.

Grants which Uniting Churches have accessed to support their community garden projects include:

- New Missional Gatherings Seed Fund (see Box 4)
- Grants from Presbyteries
- Government grants – particularly local Council, and federal government grants
- UnitingCare Ageing Hunter, Central Coast & New England Region Innovative Community Grants Fund
- Open Garden Scheme Community Garden Grants
- Grants from other community groups (e.g. Lioness' Club)

Box 4: New Missional Gatherings Seed Fund grants

The New Missional Gatherings Seed Fund makes grants four times a year, for amounts of up to $5,000. The Fund is designed to help kick-start new initiatives which aim to form new missional gatherings – which includes people beyond any previously existing church. Community gardens, in creating rich, multiple connections between church congregations and their local communities, can be considered to be new missional gatherings. Churches have successfully applied to the Fund for their community garden projects. See http://www.missionresource.nsw.uca.org.au/seedfund.htm

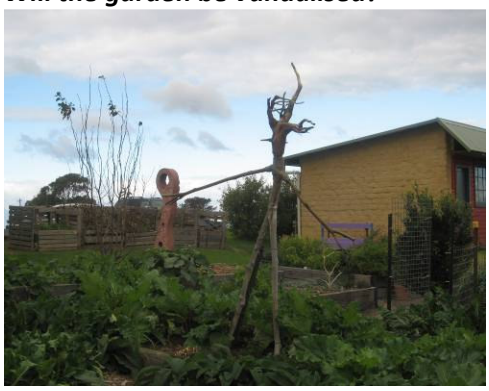
2.8 Common Concerns Raised by Churches

If your church is considering starting a community garden project, it is important to hear the concerns that may be raised by others in your congregation, as well as in the broader community. Here are some concerns that have been voiced in Uniting Church congregations in NSW/ACT:

Our church is small and/or ageing. Will we have to do a lot of the physical work or have to cover costs associated with the garden?

- There is no need to build the community garden all at once – you can start slow and see what develops. Taking the time to grow relationships with the broader community, and to build interest, common vision and commitment means that people will be inspired to work together on the project and that church members need not be overly burdened by physical work.
- Obtaining funds from those sources listed in section 2.7 can help to ensure that the garden is cost-neutral, and doesn't need to draw on churches' existing finances.

Will the garden be vandalised?



Garden of Eden Community Garden, St George's Uniting Church Eden. Photo: Judith Dalton

Most gardens are likely to experience minor theft or vandalism at some stage (e.g. missing tools or veggies). Being aware of this possibility at the outset and taking it into account in garden design and operation can minimise this. Some gardens are happy to live with a bit of missing produce, and even see it as a gift to the community. While some community gardens erect a fence, others choose not to. Cultivating community involvement, and a sense of ownership and appreciation can be more effective than fences. Indeed, the presence of community gardens has been shown to decrease the amount of graffiti and vandalism in surrounding areas[13].

Will we lose control over the space?

It is a basic Christian claim that we don't own land, or churches or indeed anything – God owns it (Ps 24). Churches hosting community gardens believe that church land has been entrusted to them by God for the benefit of the whole community. The best way to deal with issues concerning use of the land is to:

- Have a clear memorandum of understanding – if the garden is run by an external group
- Have clear garden rules governing conduct in the garden – if the garden is run by the church
- Build strong relationships between the church and the garden group so that concerns can be addressed before they escalate

A community garden is a lot of effort. Will it bring people into the church?

Some churches have seen gardeners come along to worship services. But the growing relationships between church members and (other) gardeners are often manifest in other ways and provide many opportunities for spiritual sharing. For example:

- When the O'Connor Community Garden was first established, the gardeners organised a morning tea for the church congregation as an expression of thanks for hosting the garden
- At the Garden of Eden community garden at St George's Uniting Church Eden, unemployed people on Mission Australia placements share grace and lunch together with church members
- At the Cooma Uniting Church, gardeners and worshippers often share morning tea on Sundays
- Several churches have run fetes and are planning harvest festivals, with the gardeners involved

[13] See Claire Nettle (2010) Growing Community: Starting and nurturing community gardens, Adelaide: Health SA, Government of South Australia and Community and Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association Inc, p.21.

3 COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA)

"We need to see farmers as entering into the sanctuary of the soil and engaging the mysterious forces of creation in order to bless and nourish the inner and outer life of the community they serve."
Sr Miriam Therese MacGillis (2008), in Alice Peck, ed, Bread, Body, Spirit: Finding the Sacred in Food, SkyLights Paths Publishing, p.10

3.1 What is Community Supported Agriculture?

Community supported agriculture (CSA) is a model of food production and distribution that bypasses "middle men" such as supermarkets, and links consumers directly with local or regional farmers. It is a "community enterprise" type of community food initiative (see section 1.2). There are a number of types of CSA. Commonly, the consumer pays a season subscription and receives whatever the farmer grows. A model used in Australia by CSA schemes Food Connect Brisbane, Sydney and Adelaide is a fruit and vegetable box scheme, wherein organic produce is sourced from farmers as locally as possible, and made available to consumers at a pickup point. Food Connect Brisbane, Sydney and Adelaide are "social enterprises". A social enterprise is a non-profit business that trades to achieve social and environmental outcomes. The surpluses that are generated are used to achieve these objectives, rather than as profits to owners/shareholders. For example, Food Connect Sydney prioritises fairness (40c in every dollar goes back to the farmer), organic produce, local produce (produce travels on average less than 200km), and direct sourcing from farmers.

3.2 What are the Benefits of Community Supported Agriculture?

The benefits of CSA include:

- Better incomes for small farmers
- Food growing practices which care for the land (seasonal produce, often grown organically)
- Access to healthy food
- Reduced transportation distances and corresponding fossil fuel requirements
- Opportunities for enhanced community networks, between consumers who meet and interact at their pickup point, and between consumers and farmers. CSAs often provide opportunities for consumers to visit the farms that provide the produce

Bolis, a Sudanese farmer who works in St Mary's, provides fresh produce to Food Connect Sydney
Photo: Alex Craig, http://sydney.foodconnect.com.au

3.3 Why Are Churches Involved?

There are two Uniting Churches in NSW/ACT that are known to be participating in a CSA, Chapel by the Sea at Bondi Beach, and South Sydney Uniting Church. These churches are "city cousins" (drop-off/pick-up points for boxes) with Food Connect Sydney. Once a week, Food Connect subscribers pick up their boxes from the churches. The churches are participating because they support the objectives of Food Connect, and they also see themselves as a gathering point in their communities.

3.4 How Do We Get Started?

It is possible for churches to set up their own CSA, for example, one church congregation could develop a relationship and enter into an agreement with one or several farms. Providing guidance on this front is beyond the scope of this resource. In Sydney, getting involved in a CSA can be as simple as contacting Food Connect and expressing your church's interest in becoming a city cousin.

3.5 Online Resources for Community Supported Agriculture

Food Connect Sydney: http://sydney.foodconnect.com.au
A CSA listing is available at: www.ecodirectory.com.au/index.php/community-supported-agriculture

4 FOOD BUYING GROUPS

"For the lives of all who planted, watered and harvested to provide the food before us, and for your gift of life within the seed, we give thanks, Creator God."

Maureen Edwards (2003), in Neil Paynter, ed, Blessed Be Our Table, Wild Goose Publications, p.31

4.1 What Are Food Buying Groups?

Typically, people in a local community cooperate together to source fruit and vegetables which they then organise into boxes. By pooling their funds and buying in bulk, they are able to purchase more cost effectively than by purchasing alone. Food buying groups are sometimes colloquially known as "food cooperatives", although they may not be registered as cooperatives, or have a formal legal structure. In addition to affordability, the people in the group may also prioritise seasonal produce, organic produce and/or supporting local farmers. However, unlike community supported agriculture, food buying groups are solely consumer-driven and do not provide direct subscriptions with farmers. Some food buying groups obtain their produce from farmers markets, others from a local fruit and vegetable barn, and others may have the produce delivered by wholesalers.

4.2 What Are the Benefits of Food Buying Groups?

The benefits of food buying groups include:

- Cost savings for participants
- Enhanced relationship building and cooperation among the group
- Depending on the objectives of the food buying group, there may be other benefits similar to community supported agriculture schemes

4.3 Why Are Churches Involved?

Cafe Church in Glebe, Sydney, runs a food buying group, consisting of people within and outside of the church. A member of Springwood Uniting Church in the Blue Mountains also runs a food buying group, but not as a church project. The Springwood "Veggie Co-op's" motivation is primarily one of cost – aiming to provide fresh, high quality fruit and vegetables at a low price to members. In addition, at each shop, the Co-op provides a needy family with a free box. The Cafe Church Co-op has the additional motivation of building community around some of the essentials of everyday life (fresh food!), and environmental concern is also a part of the mix.

4.4 How Do We Get Started?

A Cafe Church shopper with a trolley of produce. Photo: Kate Parsons

Here are some general guidelines for the operation of food buying groups:

- Group members are rostered on to buy the fruit and vegetables and to pack them into boxes
- Participants receive an email every week/fortnight (depending on the frequency of the boxes) reminding them to put in their orders and who is rostered on
- Participants submit their orders and deposit the corresponding payment into the group's bank account. Much of this process can be automated using online applications such as google/yahoo groups
- The rostered shoppers purchase the produce and pack the boxes, and are reimbursed for their expenses
- Group members pick up their boxes from an agreed location

4.5 Online Resources for Food Buying Groups

See case studies and sample documents at www.unitingearthweb.org.au/explore/Community-Food/

5 OTHER IDEAS FOR COMMUNITY FOOD INITIATIVES

"When we offer a blessing upon our food, we do not merely pronounce a few pious words, but rather commit ourselves to the nurture, protection, and celebration of the gifts of creation." Norman Wirzba (2009) Saying Grace: Transforming People, Transforming the World. JSRNC, Vol 3, No 2, p.196.

Community gardens, community supported agriculture and food buying groups don't exhaust the opportunities for churches to get involved in community food initiatives and to connect with their local communities. There many other types of initiatives in the community food system (see Box 5).

Box 5: Diagram of community food systems[14]

Other possibilities for churches may include:

5.1 Garden Share

Garden share involves connecting garden owners with people who don't have access to a garden but want to grow food. A variety of garden share schemes are running in the UK. For example, there are schemes run by community groups and aged care services that match elderly homeowners who are not able (or need assistance) to garden with younger people who live in units. The benefits include healthy, locally produced food, reduced social isolation, and enhanced intergenerational relationships. Garden share also operates at a less formal level – as private arrangements between individuals. This is the case Australia where no known formal schemes yet exist.

Churches could consider starting their own informal or formal garden share schemes. For example, many Uniting Church congregations are ageing, and enterprising churches that are in a locality with units may be able to help match elderly church members who would like to see their gardens producing food with aspiring gardeners, the latter of whom may or may not be connected with the church.

[14] Russ Grayson (2009) Our Food Future: Global challenges, local solutions, www.sydneyfoodfairness.org.au. Presentation at Faith Ecology Network "Fasting and Feasting" seminar, Parramatta, 2nd August.

5.2 Food Swapping and Sharing

We have heard stories of church members in regional towns sharing their home grown produce with their neighbours. Food swapping – where neighbours exchange produce, is another version of this. Some community supported agriculture schemes also incorporate food swapping. For example, Food Connect Sydney provides a "swap box" with extra produce to City Cousins. Subscribers able to swap something from their own box, and perhaps even contribute by bringing something they have grown in their own garden. A more formalised version of food swapping is known as the "Urban Orchard" model, wherein a venue hosts a regular gathering of people who come together to exchange their home grown food. Urban Orchards are underway in Melbourne and Adelaide.

Greens at Rahamim Ecological Learning Community, Bathurst
Photo: Miriam Pepper

5.3 Grow Zones

EarthAbbey, a Christian movement in the UK concerned with contemplative spirituality and projects to live more in tune with the earth, has started a "Grow Zones" project. Grow Zones supports groups of eight to 20 people to club together to share skills and tools and help each other to transform their gardens into food growing paradises. Churches could start similar projects.

5.4 Online Resources for Other Community Food Initiatives

Garden share in Australia: www.communitygarden.org.au/guidelines
UK garden share schemes: www.edinburghgardenshare.org.uk, www.grofun.org.uk/gardenshare.htm
Land share in the UK: www.landshare.net
Urban orchard in Adelaide: www.adelaide.foe.org.au/?page_id=408
Grow Zones in the UK: www.earthabbey.com/growzones

5.5 Get In Touch

Is your church involved in food swapping and sharing, garden sharing, or another community food initiative? Do you have ideas, resources or stories to share with others? The Uniting Earthweb Group is keen to hear from you – see our contact details on the contents page of this resource.