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Michelle Estelle Lewis

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Date

**Faith and Food Justice in New Rochelle, NY:  
The Peace Garden Project**

By

Michelle Estelle Lewis  
Doctor of Ministry

Candler School of Theology

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Rev. Alice Rogers, D.Min.  
Project Consultant

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Rev. Brent Strawn, Ph.D.  
Director of D.Min Program

## **Abstract**

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The Peace Garden Project  
By Michelle Estelle Lewis

Food justice and issues of food security are present in every community in America. Faith and Food Justice in New Rochelle, NY: The Peace Garden Project addresses food justice issues in the community of New Rochelle, New York while asking the questions: Is it possible to address cultural competency while addressing food justice? Is there a theology for understanding and engaging in social justice work as communities of faith? What are some ways that we might engage with our neighbors and other community partners to create healthier eco-systems in our natural and built environments? Which eco-systems are we a part of in the communities where we live, work, and worship?

This project begins answering these questions for the community of New Rochelle, while providing theological and practical grounding for the role of gardens in communities. The Peace Garden Project shows that gardening in communities doesn't just provide an opportunity to grow healthy food, but provides opportunities for individuals and groups to begin challenging the intersectional oppressive systems that are present in each and every community in America.

**Faith and Food Justice in New Rochelle, NY:  
The Peace Garden Project**

**By**

**Michelle Estelle Lewis**

**Elizabeth City State University, B.A., 2000**

**Regent University, M.A., 2003**

**Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, M.E.Sc., 2013**

**Yale Divinity School, M.Div., 2013**

**Project Consultant: Rev. Alice Rogers, D.Min.**

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## Section 1- The Peace Garden Project

Food insecurity is a big justice issue.<sup>1</sup> In thinking about this as a large justice issue, many people may have found themselves wondering, “What can I do?” One of the ways we can begin to address the issue of food justice is by thinking about it on micro instead of macro scales. This is possible with local action.

41.2 million Americans live in food-insecure households.<sup>2</sup> In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”<sup>3</sup> Dr. King was talking about the “interrelatedness of all states,” and systems of oppression, but given the fact of food insecurity, it is clear that food systems in the United States are one of the places where injustice is regularly seen, felt, practiced, and displayed by both government and private entities. If it is true that such a large percentage of people living in the United States are food insecure, then our faith communities have a unique opportunity to challenge current food systems and create new ways/opportunities of being a part of creation so that we can address the system of injustice present in every community.<sup>4</sup> These issues of food

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam Webster defines Food insecure as, “unable to consistently access or afford adequate food.” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/food%20insecure> (accessed February 15, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Feeding America, “Poverty and Hunger Fact Sheet.” <http://www.feedingamerica.org/assets/pdfs/fact-sheets/poverty-and-hunger-fact-sheet.pdf> (accessed 2 March, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> The King Center Digital Archives, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. <http://www.thekingcenter.org> (Accessed, 25 February, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> The Future of Food, The Oxford Martin Programme on the Future of Food, “Food System.” <http://www.futureoffood.ox.ac.uk/what-food-system> (accessed, February 15, 2018). Food system is defined as, “the governance and economics of food production, its sustainability, the degree to which we waste food, and how food production affects the natural environment, and includes how food affects health and well-being, including nutrition, obesity, and food safety.”

justice are not new and were first brought to light during the environmental movement of the 1980's.<sup>5</sup>

The New Rochelle Peace Garden Project (NRPG), located at New Rochelle United Methodist Church (NRUMC) begins to address the issues of food security in the community of New Rochelle, NY (NRNY) on a micro scale. The project was divided into three phases. Phase 1 was the initial garden. Phase 2 of the project included creating the garden beds and putting the seeds and plants in the ground, and our physical wellness initiative. Phase 3 of the project included a study of our faith and our food from Christian and Jewish perspectives. The sessions were team-taught with Rabbi Zach Sitkin from the Beth-El Congregation. In the sections of the paper that follow I will provide a brief history of NRUMC and the community of New Rochelle, NY (NRNY). I will give a brief overview of the Biblical theology of food and eating as learned about and shared through the Peace Garden Project. I will address the initial goals of the project and provide an assessment of the phases, and the final section of this paper will address the conclusions that I have drawn, through personal and communal reflection about the project.

## **Section 2- New Rochelle United Methodist Church**

New Rochelle United Methodist Church NRUMC is located in New Rochelle, New York (NRNY) a suburb of New York City (NYC). NRUMC was borne out of a merger between two United Methodist Churches (UMC) that had more than 150 years of combined ministry in the community of NRNY. Though the churches merged from two different backgrounds (one Black UMC and the other predominantly White), the congregations have been working to create a

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<sup>5</sup> Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman, *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* (Cambridge, US: MIT Press, 2011), 9.

completely new faith community/identity. The church has six paid staff people from differing backgrounds, denominations, and faith communities. The staff members of the church are from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States of America. Though most are Christian, this is not a requirement for employment; the Music Director is Jewish, and all the other staff members of the church are from Christian faith communities that are not United Methodist. The population of NRUMC is as diverse as the community of NRY. The population of NRY is 79637.<sup>6</sup> 40 % of the community of NRY are racial/ethnic minorities, and 16.2 % of the population is living below the poverty level.<sup>7</sup> Research about food justice indicates that poor people and racial/ethnic minorities are the groups most likely to have inadequate access to fresh fruits and vegetables.<sup>8</sup>

### **Section 3- Theological Basis for the Garden**

As we journey through scripture, we see that food shows up more than once, and those biblical relationships and the relationships that we develop with others are centered around food or are directly impacted through/by the sharing of food. At NRUMC, even before the garden began, the sharing of food was one of the ways members of the community cultivated relationship. It has also been used as one of the tools by the church for disciple-making, and spiritual formation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> City-data for New Rochelle, <http://www.city-data.com/city/New-Rochelle-New-York.html>. (accessed 26 June, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Food Empowerment Project; "Food Deserts." <http://www.foodispower.org> (Accessed 1 October, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> The youth program at NRUMC makes and delivers monthly meals to one of the homeless shelters in town.

Norman Wirzba calls sharing food one of the pathways to discipleship. That connects us not only to the people or persons with whom we share food but also to the divine.<sup>10</sup>

Mark 16:15 challenges us to, “Go into the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” The question for many faith communities becomes how to put this charge into action, and the challenge of the gospel can seem daunting for a congregation that is attempting to tackle the problem from a macro instead of a micro scale. One of the ways we can begin to tackle the problem on a micro scale is by identifying the many ecosystems we are a part of on a daily basis.

In her book *Worldly Wonder*, Mary Evelyn Tucker writes,

The grounding of our human aspirations within the creativity of Earth processes and within the limits of the ecosystems may give some appropriate measure to the expansive tendencies of the enlightenment mentality. As we recognize more fully that humans are a subsystem of the Earth we may have the basis for establishing equitable and sustainable economic, social, and political systems.<sup>11</sup>

When we view our communities and neighborhoods as mini-ecosystems, we can begin establishing these equitable systems, and we can start addressing the issue of food justice in our communities. Food justice is one of the most prevalent problems in the community of NRNY. Taking a look at the question of food justice on the micro instead of the macro scale can help a community of faith begin to do the work of eradicating the disparities that exist within community food systems.

It can be argued that one crucial test of our faith is our relationship with food. In the earliest iterations of the biblical text, we see Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve have been given specific instructions. They are to care for the garden and are instructed that they can eat from any of the trees of the garden, with one caveat; they are not supposed to eat of

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<sup>10</sup> Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God* (New York, NY: Oxford Press, 1989), 71.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Worldly Wonder* (Berkeley, CA: Open Court Publishing, 2003), 65.

the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.<sup>12</sup> Human nature could tell us what happened next if we didn't know the end of the story. Adam and Eve did exactly what they had been told not to do; they eat the fruit of that tree. According to the story, Eve eats first and then shares the fruit with Adam. Through the eating of this fruit, we are introduced to sin. However, the sharing of food in and of itself isn't sinful.

The biblical text provides guidance about when sharing/not sharing food becomes sinful. Isaiah 58:7-10 reminds us that when we share our food with the poor and provide shelter for the homeless God watches over us.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Luke 3:11 says, "...whoever has food must do likewise," Just as we are challenged to share with those in need. Readers of the texts are also cautioned against gluttony. Proverbs 25:27 says, "It's not good to eat too much honey..." and Ezekiel 16:49 reminds us, that included in Sodom's sins were pride and, "excess of food."<sup>14</sup> These scriptures help us to understand how through the sharing of food, we can both positively and negatively impact relationships and our spirituality.

Another theme in the biblical text about food, specifically the harvesting of crops, is gleaning. Gleaning is often misunderstood as the biblical premise where the poor are permitted by those who are harvesting to go through the fields to pick up the grain that was dropped.<sup>15</sup> However, the rules of gleaning provide some simple direction for providing for the poor but are also in place to ensure that fields are not over-harvested. Gleaning laws address when crops should be harvested, and the amount of time that fields should lie fallow according to the Hebrew law.

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<sup>12</sup> Genesis 2:15 (NRSV).

<sup>13</sup> Proverbs 25:27(NRSV).

<sup>14</sup> Ezekiel 16:49 (NRSV).

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/gleaning/> (Accessed February 25, 2018).

The practice was one that kept those who had fields mindful of the poor in their communities while being sensitive to the needs of the ecosystem. The method of ensuring that the poor are provided for is tied to the Hebrew understanding of Tzedakah. Tzedakah is the understanding that we have a responsibility to be good stewards of all that is entrusted to us. Tzedakah, however, is not merely providing charity for the poor, but means, “righteousness, fairness, and justice.”<sup>16</sup>

Our decision, therefore, to not provide food to those in our communities that are in need is not just an issue of sin, but is an issue of justice. In Matthew chapter 25:31-41, we encounter the parable of the sheep and the goats. As a part of the parable, the crowd addressed by the King asks the question, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger, or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then the King responds, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, the sin we commit by not feeding our brother, or sister, or sibling in Christ, becomes a sin that we commit against God.

Norman Wirzba in his book *Food and Faith, a Theology of Eating*, characterizes much of our eating as sin. He says,

Sin is a disoriented life and a misdirected desire. According to traditional accounts, the first sin is pride, the naïve and arrogant disposition that a person thinks more highly of themselves than they ought... Adam and Eve wanted to have life on their terms. This is why shortly after eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve felt shame. Shame is the realization that our freedom has gone wrong.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jacqueline Degroot. “Jewish Philanthropy, The Concept of Tzedakah.” <https://www.learningtogive.org/resources/jewish-philanthropy-concept-tzedakah> (accessed 25 February, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 25:43-45 (NRSV).

<sup>18</sup> Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 77.

By working to ensure food justice in our communities, we are able to not only right the wrong that has been created, but we are also able to bring justice to those people and communities that are oppressed through our food systems. When we begin to take all creation and our role in it seriously, we can connect with our goodness in relationship to creation.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, we can connect with our goodness through the love of Christ and our redemption from sin.

In the effort to redeem us from our sins, God sends his son Jesus to the earth who dies for our sins. Before his death, Jesus shares a final meal with his disciples. Christian communities practice the sacrament of communion. It is the sharing of bread and wine. This sharing of food becomes not only a way we can care for the poor in our communities but is the practice through which we gain salvation, forgiveness, mercy, and grace. It connects us to the divine and sets us on a path to a right relationship with God and the people around us. Eating in the garden is how sin first enters the world, and we are redeemed by eating every time we participate in the sacrament of communion.

The third passage of scripture that provides contextual framework while helping us to gain a greater understanding of the garden project is 1 Kings 17:14. In this passage, Elijah goes into a city and finds a widow. He tells her that he needs something to eat. She lets him know that all she has left is a little bit of flour and that she intends to cook it, and then go off into the wilderness to die. After some coaxing, she agrees and ends up with, a supply that is never-ending. She is an example of extending radical and radical hospitality to a stranger.

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<sup>19</sup> Wendell Berry, *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 46.

Both the widow and the Syrophenician woman were in their “in-between.” They were in a place of suffering wherein they were waiting for God to show up. The only thing that could have made a difference in their lives was a magnificent manifestation of the divine. They were able to have this experience when they recognized and named their “in-between.” Those people living in poverty in this country are living in a place that is not unlike where the Syrophenician woman finds herself.

The NRPG helped those who participated in the gardening process and the sharing of food and building community to recognize their “in-between” and be able to name it. It also has helped others who are not in their in-between; There is power in naming.<sup>20</sup> Naming takes the power away from and gives the power back to the person who has begun to feel powerless. Through this project, participants gained new understanding about revelation and learned how their individual and collective power could be used to transform a community. Participants in the project indicated that they came away from the project being able to identify the divine on both micro and macro scales, and having spent a portion of each workday/community gathering thinking about: 1. Different ways to connect with the divine. 2. Connections between the subjective and objective that help us to connect with or keep us from connecting to the divine.

#### **Section 4- Why A Garden?**

Gardens have been shown to have many positive impacts on the communities where they are situated. The Centers for Disease Control lists the following as some of the benefits of

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<sup>20</sup> Rabbi Andrew Davids, “The Power of a Name: The Power of Naming.” <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-power-of-a-name-the-power-of-naming/> (Accessed 1 December, 2017).

community gardens: community revitalization, decreased violence.<sup>21</sup> Other benefits of gardens are increased property values, exercise, and an improvement in mental health.<sup>22</sup> Research has also shown that gardens have the potential to positively impact communities by helping the growers reconnect to the earth, having an effect on the person like prayer or meditation. All of those mentioned above contribute to the social well-being of a community and on an individual's spirituality.<sup>23</sup>

In his book *Ecologies of Grace*, Willis Jenkins posits that gardening brings about hope, “bringing forth fecundity from sparsity; the human act will be an act of release for the earth too, and for the whole creaturely world.”<sup>24</sup> One of the outcomes of this project is helping persons to find hope by connecting to and creating through gardening. However, there are numerous potential positive impacts on the community of NRNY and Westchester County through addressing the issues of food justice in the community. The NRPG takes us back into the garden to address the food justice issues in the community of NRNY through a Christ-centered program that focuses on the connections between food justice, gardens, and our spirituality. Initially, I hoped for the following outcomes:

- To provide opportunities for NRUMC members to be engaged in theological reflection about what our faith says about the connections between our faith and our food.
- To use the peace garden as a way to address cultural competency, community engagement, and food justice in the community.

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<sup>21</sup> Centers for Disease Control, “Healthy Places Community Gardens.” <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/healthtopics/healthyfood/community.htm> (accessed 26 June, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Gardeners in Community Development, “Benefits of Community Gardening.” <http://www.gardendallas.org/benefits.htm> (accessed 26 June, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> This concept of spirituality is not based in a specific faith.

<sup>24</sup> Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace* (New York: Oxford, 2008), 163.

- To help participants gain a deeper understanding of their spirituality and the effects that adequate access to healthy food has on spirituality and total body wellness.
- To examine our interconnectedness as humans to Earth and the processes and role that food justice can have in creating sustainable systems in our communities.
- To develop cultural competency in a society that is driven by racism, sexism, ageism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and homophobia.
- To feed at least ten families in NR.

### **Section 5- In the Garden**

The Peace Garden project has been divided into three phases. Phase 1 was the initial garden. The initial phase raised a number of questions which included: 1. Will we be able to successfully grow food in this community? 2. How much food will we be able to produce? 3. Will the food we grow be enough? 4. How many people will be needed to work the garden? Phase 2 of the project included creating the garden beds and putting the seeds and plants in the ground. There was also an eight-week movement series that focused on the connections between our spirituality and movement that included Yoga and dance as a part of our approach to total body wellness. Phase 3 of the project included a study of our faith and our food from Christian and Jewish perspectives. I team taught the spirituality sessions with Rabbi Zach Sitkin from the Beth-El Congregation, New Rochelle.

We started the garden as part of the Abundant Health kick-off expo.<sup>25 26</sup> The PGNR started with six raised garden beds and was increased to 11 by the end of the summer. The produce grown included cabbage, Swiss chard, collard greens, tomatoes, green peppers, butternut squash, kale, corn, carrots, beets, and rutabagas. The volunteers for the garden were primarily members of NRUMC. The participants were children and adults. Children were ages 4-12, and the adults were all ages. The participants were Black, White, Asian, and were from countries in Africa, and the Caribbean, India, and the United States of America. 15 people participated on a regular, rotating schedule in the garden, and ten others worked sporadically.

Though many of the adults that participated regularly knew each other well, others were new to the group. I observed that those adults new to the group were welcomed by all. All participants exhibited a willingness to work together and to learn from one another. There were three prerequisites to work in the garden: 1. A willingness to learn. 2. The willingness to work collaboratively. 3. The desire to have fun. One of the greatest challenges came from attempting to help participants understand that no one should work alone and that the primary purpose of the food grown was to feed community members.<sup>27 28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Abundant Health- is a Global connection of the United Methodist Church. Its goal is mental, physical, and spiritual well-being <http://www.umcabundanthealth.org>. (Accessed, 25 February, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> The church hosted and helped to plan the expo for the New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. One of the events of the expo was planting the seeds many of which were later transplanted into the garden. In addition to seed planting there were workshops about the mind/body/spirit connection to wellness and our food choices.

<sup>27</sup> Garden participants were encouraged to work in a group not smaller than two. The biblical basis for this is in Mark 6:7 where the disciples are sent out in two's.

<sup>28</sup> Through the process I learned of the number of families in the congregation that could benefit from access to the food grown in the garden.

Regularly scheduled garden work days took place on the first and third Saturday's of the month. Work in the garden started at 8:00 AM and participants were able to come and go as they needed to during the morning. 8:00 AM was chosen because it was still a relatively cool point in the day. Most workdays enough people showed up so that the work went by fast. We didn't spend more than two hours working in the garden unless it was a harvest day. On workdays, we did everything from planting to pulling weeds, to watering, to harvesting. We did not ask people to sign up for specific days because we wanted to give people the freedom to show without feeling overly committed.

The commitment of each individual and each family was different. Some people chose to show up regularly, i.e., every work session, and in-between regularly scheduled sessions. Others showed up only once or twice during the growing season. Harvest days brought with them the greatest need for help. We needed more help on harvest days because we were pulling or cutting plants. As vegetables were harvested, they had to be cleaned and packaged for distribution. In packaging for distribution, we worked to make sure that each family received an equal portion of all of the vegetables from the harvest.

Prior to harvest day, an inventory would be taken to see which vegetables would be harvested on the following Saturday. After the inventory was completed recipe cards were generated for the vegetables that would be included in the family's share. These recipe cards were included to give the families ideas and options for cooking the vegetables in the event that they were unfamiliar with any of the items. An effort was made to plant vegetables that people would be familiar with regardless of their income, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. The recognition that the recipe cards would be helpful for families was born out of my own experience of participating in a CSA a number of years back. I regularly received vegetables that

I couldn't identify and at times felt embarrassed and ashamed because I had no idea what some of the vegetables were or how to cook them.

After packaging the vegetables, they were distributed in the most densely populated areas of NR. The following case studies took place on garden workdays. The first case study shows how the work in the garden was used to help teach children about faith, spirituality, and our connectedness to the environment. The second case study demonstrates the need in the community of New Rochelle for the peace garden project and the need for education about healthy eating, and health and wellness. There was no requirement or proof of need for receiving the produce.

There was also no requirement for participating in the movement portion of the program. We held the sessions over eight weeks in the evening. There was an almost 50/50 split of church members, and community members. The movement sessions were a great way to share information related to the garden, and other initiatives at the church.

## **Section 6- Case Studies**

### **Case Study 1: Jesus in the Garden**

"It's dead." It was a definitive statement from the seven years old boy.

We gathered around to take a look at caught the boy's attention. It was a bee. This led us to a conversation about the lifecycle of bees, and the contribution of bees to the environment. The children were sad that the bee was dead. The children had the opportunity to talk about how the death of the bee made them feel, and why. As our conversation about death came to a close, the little boy that noticed the bee reached his hand toward it in what I couldn't tell was an effort to grab the bee or to flick it from the flower.

“What are you doing?” I asked him. He looked up at me sheepishly and said, “I was going to move him.” I asked if we could let the bee stay, because he wasn’t hurting anything.

We continued to look at the bee in silence when the bee flew off. As the bee flew off and the children began to exclaim, “It’s alive! It’s alive!”

“So, was it dead?” One of the children asked. The question led us to a conversation about Jesus, our Christian faith, and the resurrection. This is the type of experiential learning that you can only get in an outdoor setting with an extemporaneous activity that allows for questions, self-discovery, and spiritual conversation.

The children that worked in the garden had fun. Many of them pulled their first carrots and picked their first Swiss chard and kale. They also got to see and participate in the growing process from start to finish. The children were excited to plant seeds and then watch the seeds grow. They were even more excited to learn that they were able to help families in need in the community. Even the youngest children that participated understood that they were helping other children their age(s) have enough to eat. This also provided an opportunity for us to talk about Adam and Eve in the garden, and Jesus being mistaken as the gardener after his resurrection.

## **Case Study 2: The First Harvest**

When we started the garden, we had this question of how we would identify families in need. We decided that it would be best to at that time allow people to self-identify. I also feel strongly about the need to not shame anyone for being recipients of produce from the garden. Too often shame causes people not to take advantage of the resources available to them. Even in the study that we conducted at NRUMC, people were unlikely to admit that they could benefit from the produce in the garden. However, when the question was reframed instead asking: Can

you or someone you know benefit from the produce in the garden? The answer was overwhelmingly, “yes.”<sup>29</sup>

The produce from the first harvest of the peace garden yielded produce bags for 30 families. Each family received enough fresh produce for two vegetable meals for a family of four. During the growing season produce that we grew was supplemented with organic onions and garlic. After harvesting, we distributed the produce in areas near downtown NR. As we passed out the produce from the back of the vehicle people lined up. Many asked if they could have extra bags for their neighbors who were senior citizens. Some people asked how to cook the vegetables. We let them know that there was a recipe card in the bag. One man even asked if the greens from his beets were edible. We informed him that they were. All of the people thanked us profusely for the vegetables and were shocked that they were free.<sup>30</sup>

There were many lessons that we learned from the first year of the peace garden project.

1. There is a genuine need for this type of ministry in the community.
2. From the survey’s we learned that there were a number of people who wanted to see if the garden would be successful before they participated. More people have signed up to volunteer in 2018.
3. The need in the community was greater than we could meet. Having needs greater than can be met, should never be a deterrent to doing ministry. We will never be able to save everyone or to help everyone, and this shouldn’t be the goal. The goal should be to do the best with the resources we have available.

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<sup>29</sup> Additional information about these numbers are included in the statistical analysis.

<sup>30</sup> We are in conversations about including a pay scale for the vegetables for the 2018 growing season to remove some of the stigma associated with receiving free food.

4. Opportunities to connect with one's spirituality while working in the garden will reveal themselves.
5. Making mistakes is okay. There are only so many things you can control when gardening outdoors. Control what you can, and leave the rest up to God.
6. People like free food.
7. Don't stop. Initially, we decided that the best approach for our wellness sessions was 6-8 weeks on with 6-8 weeks off. However, it was challenging to get the classes started back once we stopped holding them on a regular basis.

## **Section 7- Survey Results**

Along with the participant observation that took place in the garden, one survey was conducted during the Month of February as we were planning for the 2018 growing season. The purpose of the survey was to gain a greater understanding of why people didn't participate in the garden, and if members of the NRUMC understood the purpose of the garden. The survey included 12 questions.<sup>31</sup> There were a total of 36 respondents from the 78 surveys that were distributed. From the survey's we learned that though the majority of respondents knew about the garden, most had not spent any time working in the garden the previous year. The greatest barriers to participating in the garden were the time constraints of potential participants. When asked if there was other information one participant wrote that they would need childcare if it wasn't provided. This shows me that despite our best efforts to make sure everyone understood their children were welcome in the garden, some saw their children as a barrier to showing up during the 2017 growing season. Additionally, two respondents said that they thought the garden

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<sup>31</sup> Appendix A.

was for children only. This indicates that there is a greater need to make sure that people understand the nature of the ministry. It also suggests that we could do a better job of featuring children and adults working together in the garden in advertising for the NRPG.

Some people also stated that they didn't participate because they didn't know how to garden. Though we repeatedly said in our announcements that knowing how to garden was not a prerequisite, "not knowing" still kept people from participating. Though it was noted in the announcements, it wasn't explicitly stated in the printed material that went out about the garden. It will be helpful for us, in future growing seasons, to have garden learning days where people learn to identify the types of plants growing in the garden as well as how to distinguish between plants and weeds. It will also be beneficial for us to have days where we teach how to harvest. This may be done by planting teaching boxes. Participants would have to demonstrate their proficiency at the teaching site before working in the actual garden. Though we did teach people how to harvest particular vegetables on harvest days, we still had a couple of instances in the garden where vegetables were improperly harvested, and the productivity of plants was affected.

Just over 10% of respondents did not believe that 16% of the population of NR is living at or below the poverty level, which indicates that there is still education that needs to take place to help the church understand the community. 19% of survey respondents reported being food insecure. This was one of the numbers that I found to be the most shocking from the garden statistics, namely because the majority of the food that we produced went to the community, and very little of it went to NRUMC members. One person who responded to the survey said, "there are a number of people in the congregation who may be food insecure, but they are too proud to share this information with anyone." I'm not sure how we can ensure that the community

knows/understands that the food is also available to them. However, I wonder if these same respondents equate shame with free food. While this can't be proved, some people left this question blank on their survey's but did answer the following question stating that they or someone they knew would benefit from the food grown in the garden. I found it less surprising that 28% of respondents said they or someone they know would benefit from the free/reduced price food from the garden.

Additionally, 28% of respondents said that they were aware of the number of families that the church fed during the previous growing season, which again speaks to our need to find a more effective means for communicating the work of the garden. 92% of respondents said that they would like to be a part of learning about food and faith with people of other faiths. This is encouraging, especially since to date approximately 25 people have participated in our joint learning sessions with another 30 scheduled to regularly participate as we head into the 2018 growing season. 75% of respondents shared that they are aware that the church has received a grant to continue the work of the garden ministry. Which indicates that our current messaging about the garden is having its intended effect. 67% of respondents said that they would be willing to spend one day per week during the next growing season working in the garden. 92% of respondents said that they are glad they believe it is a good idea that the garden will be handicapped accessible this year. These results indicate that as the ministry continues to grow, and there is a better understanding of how the project connects to our spirituality, people have been more willing to participate. We have even managed to generate support from people who "hate gardening."

The third phase of the garden project included our joint learning sessions. Our learning sessions proved to be a great way not just for members of the church to get to know one another,

but also provided an amazing opportunity to get to know the members of the Jewish community. We had the chance to revisit texts that were familiar to many of the Christians. However, one of the most significant learnings was engaging with people who were looking at the gospels for the first time. The teaching about food Justice from the perspective of Judaism also gave many Christians their first look at texts from the Torah. All who participated in the joint learning sessions have asked about continuing the meetings, and we are currently scheduling additional learning opportunities for NRUMC and the members of the groups that we have partnered with for the 2018 growing season.

Our learning didn't just include our faith, and spirituality, but included learning about each other that is vital to the life of the NRPG moving forward. Included personal sharing and storytelling, which will be instrumental as we continue to build relationships in the community. One of the regular participants in our learning sessions recently confessed that she hates gardening, and doesn't like to get her hands dirty. However, she has offered to do PR for the garden, to help schedule volunteers, and to do some of the food justice and faith teaching as we head into the next garden season. In addition to growing in our faith and spirituality, we gained a vast knowledge about the people who make up our community, the strengths, and opportunities for growth for the people who were/or are becoming a part of the project, and the why behind individual and group(s) engagement in the garden. This project helps to create places for understanding. These places have fostered healing by creating a place where all are welcome while teaching participants what it means to welcome and be in community with, "the stranger."

## **Section 8- Self-Reflection**

I was only slightly optimistic when we began early talks about the NRPG. I had tried to start a Peace Garden in another city at another church, and the initial responses and concerns of the people were: “People might steal our vegetables,” and “it might make our property look bad.” It was an area with just as many, if not more poor people than New Rochelle. That experience, though disheartening made me realize when we started the peace garden at New Rochelle that it would be essential for us to gather as many community partners as possible, and that it needed to be the church’s idea. Two of the reasons will be able to expand for the 2018 growing season is because of the partnerships we have built around the garden through this project, and it was a project that members of the congregation wanted to do under the leadership of the former pastor, but that never happened. The partnerships and additional supports were also easier to gather with a successful year under our belts. The actual outcomes from the garden in 2017 were:

- Participants gained a greater understanding of the similarities and differences between Judaism and Christianity.
- Fed more than 50 families in the community of NRNY.
- Provided food to a local shelter and a local soup kitchen.
- Created new community partnerships.
- A visit to the Yale farm to better understand how the Peace Garden project could further engage the community.
- Created new and deepened existing relationships.
- Created jobs for 2018.

## **Section 9- 1st Year Review**

Though the 2017 garden had a late start, it didn't stop us from feeding more than 50 families. We started with six garden boxes and increased to 11 over the course of the growing season. There were three large harvests with three smaller harvests in between. We learned a lot of lessons this year about the types of produce that are viable in the community, and things we need to do to maintain the garden as organic while thinking about pest control. The garden has generated a lot of support from both the church and the broader community. The community partners that we have gathered for the 2018 growing season include 4 faith communities, the local boys and girls club, the local high school, a network of doctors, 2 nurses, 3 personal trainers, 2 nutritionists, 3 professors, the New Rochelle Youth Bureau, the Mayor's office, and 2 chefs.

Through this project, we have received a grant of \$50000.00 and are being considered another smaller award for \$20000.00 to do additional youth programming related to the garden. The funding that we are receiving will allow us to increase the number of garden boxes from 11 to approximately 50. It will also let us to make some of the boxes accessible for disabled persons and will provide us with those tools necessary to develop the infrastructure. The funding will also allow us to strategically locate refrigerated boxes within the city of New Rochelle with free or low-cost produce, and will allow us to hire staff for the summer to assist with the work of the caring for the garden, organizing, and leading the spirituality development sessions, and to bring in guest speakers. Additionally, funding will enable us to provide stipends for college students that are working with the new ministry. It will give us the funds necessary to include picnic tables in the garden, and pizza grills for community pizza nights. During the 2018 harvest season, community dinners will be held weekly. Dinners will center on some theme related to

faith and food. Participants will be able to work in the garden, choose their vegetables and then gather around a table to share a meal with others and discuss faith while continuing in this process of building right relationships with our neighbors and the divine.

## **Section 10- Conclusion**

Despite our slow start, we were able to accomplish far more than we had hoped with the NRPG. A project that seemed like it would address the food and spirituality needs of a group of people over a three-month period has turned into a years-long project. Participants deepened their faith while addressing food justice issues in the community. The primary component that I will change for subsequent growing seasons and the changes we have made for the 2018 growing season is to have joint learning sessions at the start of the garden and throughout the growing season. The joint learning sessions have been instrumental in participants in the NRPG knowing and understanding why others show up, and why they are passionate about food justice in the community of NRNY.<sup>32</sup>

The NRPG showed us that when we view the problems that our communities face on a micro scale, it is possible to make a substantial change in a city. The work in the garden brought a number of variables to light about the community, its needs, and the people working in the garden.<sup>33</sup> The changes that we make are to the community ecosystem, but also to a system that oppresses the marginalized peoples of our communities. By addressing the injustices in our communities, we create healthier ecosystems. These more robust ecosystems are one of the means through which we create more just and sustainable communities where the needs of all

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<sup>32</sup> Outlines for joint learning sessions are included as Appendix B.

<sup>33</sup> Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson, *Quality Research Papers for Students of Religion and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 53.

people are met. This ultimately connects us with our faith and deepens our connection to the divine. As with most other things, consistency is critical. One of the reasons people have rallied behind the work of the NRPG is because we didn't stop. In those moments, early on when it looked like it was impossible, or like it would fail, we kept believing that it was possible to make a difference. What started with a regular volunteer team of four, has grown into a regular volunteer team of more than 20 people from differing faiths with more than 30 supporting volunteers who are working to be positive agents of change in the community. We have begun the work of changing the world, one person and one meal at a time.

## Appendix

### A. Survey

#### Peace Garden Survey

1. Did you participate in the Garden last year? Y\_\_\_\_\_ N\_\_\_\_\_

2. Why didn't you participate last year?

I didn't have the time\_\_\_\_\_

I don't know how to garden\_\_\_\_\_

Other (please explain)\_\_\_\_\_

3. Is it true or false that 16% of the people living in New Rochelle are living at or below the poverty level? True\_\_\_\_\_ False\_\_\_\_\_

4. Do you or someone you know regularly not have enough to eat?

Y\_\_\_\_\_ N\_\_\_\_\_

5. Would you or someone you know benefit from the free/reduced price vegetables from the garden? Y\_\_\_\_\_ N\_\_\_\_\_

6. Are you aware that the church provided food last year for more than 50 families in New Rochelle from the garden? Y\_\_\_\_\_ N\_\_\_\_\_

7. Are you interested in learning about food and faith with people of other faiths?

Y\_\_\_\_\_ N\_\_\_\_\_

8. Are you aware that we have received a grant to continue the garden ministry?

Y\_\_\_\_\_ N\_\_\_\_\_

9. Would you be willing to spend one day a week in the summer helping with the garden? ministry? Y\_\_\_\_\_ N\_\_\_\_\_

10. Some of the garden boxes this year will be handicapped accessible. Do you think this is a good idea?

Y\_\_\_\_\_ N\_\_\_\_\_

11. Is there another ministry you think would be more beneficial to the church and the community? Please describe and if you are willing to lead the initiative.

12. Please list any additional thoughts you have about the garden ministry.

## **Appendix B**

### **A Five Week Study for Understanding our Relationship between the Food we consume and our Faith**

#### **Week 1: Food and Faith**

I. A look at the scriptures that help us to understand food and faith.

Each participant should share with the group why they are there. They should also share a bit of their history, and their relationship with food if they are comfortable talking about it. Participants should also be encouraged to share one to two of their favorite foods, and how/if they talk about/experience food as part of their faith. This should include telling the group a little bit about their faith experience (you may want to think about adding a time limit for this based on the number of participants).

II. The group should develop norms for operating that are important to them. It is imperative that this is done by the group and not by a single individual.

III. After the participants go through a time of sharing about how they view food in relation to their faith. They should read Genesis 2:9-3. Have the participants reflect on this passage of scripture and think about the role of food.

IV. Define Food Justice for participants. Have participants name where they witness/experience food justice issues in the community.

V. Discuss the ways food justice issues are parallel to other matters of social justice.

VI. Have participants discuss the ways that food is used in the places where they live, work, go to school, and worship to build community. Is it? What are some of the justice issues that have been witnessed?

VII. Close with a faith reading, and a challenge to participants to spend the time between this session and the last one thinking about.

VIII. Have participants meditate during the week about where the divine is found in the garden.

## **Food and Faith Week 2: A Scriptural Interpretation of Our place in Social Justice**

### **Movements**

- I. Begin by defining social justice, and food justice.
- II. Talk about this in relation to the community.
- III. Break out into small groups, and have participants read Matthew 15:21-28 (Jesus and the Syrophenician woman). Have the group(s) discuss the passage from the view of the Syrophenician woman while thinking about what it means to withhold resources from those in need.
- IV. Spend some time talking about the background and the history of the scripture, and why it may or may not be relevant to the themes of the session.
- V. What are the stories from Judaism and Islam that may be similar to what we see here in scripture?
- VI. Spend some time talking about the moral implications of doing reinforcing systems of oppression in communities.
- VII. Have the participants share a take away from the night's lesson.
- VIII. Have participants meditate during the week about where the divine is in the midst of injustice.

### **Week 3: Creating a Biblical Understanding of Community and Cultural Competence**

- I. Begin by having participants talk about an aspect of their culture that is important to them.
- II. Have participants share how they hope to maintain this aspect of their culture throughout their life.
- III. Divide the group into smaller groups, and have them think about how they might teach others about this aspect of their culture.
- IV. Spend time talking about the role of culture in scripture. How the biblical texts, help to preserve the culture of the day. Also spend time discussing counter-culture, and how aspects of Christianity are counter-cultural to what we see in the world.
- V. Ask the question: How does the manner that we engage with food affect how we engage with the world.
- VI. Begin talking about food deserts.
- VII. Have participants list food deserts in the community.
- VIII. Discuss food mirages, and have participants if they are willing, share their personal experiences.
- IX. Have participants meditate during the week about why it may be necessary to tap into the divine to adequately address cultural competency in our communities.

#### **Week 4: Jesus, Eating, and the Disciples**

- I. Have participants look at the following passages of scripture: Matthew 14:13-21 (Jesus feeds 5000 people), and the Mark 14:12-26 (the last supper).
- II. Have the group discuss: Is it possible to develop new community through the sharing of food?
- III. Give the group time to discuss how the sharing of food has impacted their lives.
- IV. The group should determine those things that are most important to them culturally, collectively and individually as they think about how the Peace Garden Project will best address issues in the community.
- V. Have the group develop a list of things they want to keep in mind as they move forward.
- VI. Have participants meditate during the week about how the divine is present when we share food.

## **Week 5: Putting Our Theology to Work**

- I. The group should begin planning how the work will move forward. The plan should include: Community partners, possible locations for their garden (if these have not been predetermined), produce to be grown that is important to the cultures that are surrounding the community.
- II. Participants should also think about a plan of work, and how they will manage the work. The group should consider: Will they need to bring in experts to assist. The group should assess the skills of the people in the room asking, "Who has a talent that will be useful for the work we will do that they are comfortable teaching other people?"
- III. The group should plan the degree and frequency of future meetings if they are moving forward with a garden project.
- IV. The group should plan the next meeting, clearly outlining goals and objectives.
- V. Reflect on the divine/experiences of Christ the participants have experienced during the study, and how they hope to connect with the divine while working in the garden.

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