

Refreshing the Vision to Farm

The Vision to Farm at Cedar Ridge

The *Vision for an Organic Farm at Cedar Ridge* called for a farming initiative that (i) was aligned with the overall Cedar Ridge vision, (ii) engaged the whole church in discipleship, (iii) was long-term sustainable, (iv) served the underprivileged, (v) promoted ecological health, (vi) maintained an atmosphere of peace, (vii) was productive, and (viii) engaged our local community.

Specifically, the vision called for us to turn over a “substantial part of our land” to organic farming to grow food for the poor and needy. It also included developing a farmer’s market stall on the property to serve as a community hub. Longer-term aspirations were for the farm to grow to be a resource for ethical and environmentally sound living, a center for spiritual retreat and growth, and a place where specific groups (e.g., children and adults with “nature deficit disorder”) could engage with nature in empowering and healing ways.

Current Reality

For the past eight years we have farmed less than half an acre of land (less than 0.8% of the property), which is far from being a “substantial part of our land.” Nevertheless, the farm meets most of the desired characteristics of the vision described above:

- *Vision-aligned:* The farm is a place where people can shelter from the frenzied pace of life, treasure the Earth, and serve together in community.
- *Engaging of the whole church:* Informal assessments in the last couple of years indicate that at least half the church contributes time and effort to the farm in a given season.
- *Long-term sustainable:* The farm has continued to produce significant quantities of food through the volunteer labor of Cedar Ridge members for the past eight years.
- *Serving the underprivileged:* The produce from the farm is given to groups supporting the homeless, hungry and others in need.
- *Promoting ecological health:* The farm is run on organic principles, which are often discussed with farm volunteers.
- *Maintaining an atmosphere of peace:* Many volunteers report that they find the farm to be a peaceful place.
- *Productive:* The farm grows between one and two tons of produce each year—a mix of about 20 types of fruit and vegetables.
- *Engaging the local community:* In the last couple of years, community volunteers have been increasingly engaged to work on the farm; and the farm provides the context for the Harvest Festival, which is our largest annual outreach activity.

The plan to establish a farmers market on the property was attempted for two years, but the location was deemed unviable—at least with the arrangement and organizer used for those two years. The longer-term goals of developing a spiritual retreat center and engaging people with “nature deficit disorder” have not been achieved (or even attempted).

Benefits of current farm operations

Benefits of current farm operations include the following:

- *Actualizes aspects of our vision*—Through the farm, people of all ages can engage in community, slowing down, environmental health, and social concern.
- *Identifies us externally as a caring community*—The farm is a tangible, visible ministry that demonstrates our concern for the homeless and hungry.
- *Brings new people onto the property*—SSL and other volunteers who would not otherwise visit Cedar Ridge come and learn a little about our vision.
- *Serves as a "selling point" with potential newcomers*—The rationale for the farm is easy to explain and is generally well received by people new to Cedar Ridge.
- *Gives us an opportunity to serve together*—People of all ages and a wide range of abilities serve together in community, inclusive of guest volunteers.
- *Provides a service to communities in need*—The food is usually highly needed and appreciated by the recipients, who are vulnerable in our society.
- *Helps shape our social/outreach events*—Farm events in the spring and summer, and the Harvest Festival in the fall serve as fun and meaningful social settings to deepen relationships and reach out to neighbors and friends.
- *Is valued by the church as a whole*—Although only a small number of people volunteer regularly, anecdotal evidence suggests church-wide pride in our farming efforts.

Limitations of current farm operations

Limitations of current farm operations include the following:

- *Limited contribution to vision for the property*—The farm uses only a tiny fraction of our 63 acres and engages relatively few people compared to the vision for full church involvement and outreach through a retreat center and farmers' market.
- *Minimal impact on food inequity*—For its size, the farm produces impressive quantities of fresh fruit and vegetables. However, the scale of operations means only a small number of groups can be assisted. Although communications about the farm increasingly address issues of inequity, giving away produce alone does not achieve this goal, nor does it empower the recipients.
- *Weak relationships with food recipients*—The farm has delivered produce to various different organizations and communities each year. We have yet to establish a consistent group of recipients with whom we have deep and empowering relationships. (However, this is an area that is currently being closely studied; new recipients, a second fridge for storage, and more regular deliveries are planned for the coming season.)
- *Insufficient labor*—The farm requires a substantial and sustained quantity of volunteer labor for six months of the year. Increased engagement with volunteers outside of the Cedar Ridge community has helped alleviate this need to some degree, but not completely. Time requirements of the farm potentially draw Cedar Ridge members away from other ministries.
- *Limited impact on discipleship*—While there is widespread emotional attachment to the farm, most Cedar Ridge members do not "own" the farm or consider it a service arena in which they should be involved on a regular basis.

The Way Forward

A variety of options were considered for the farm at Cedar Ridge, ranging from significant expansion to closing down the farm completely. The consensus of the Pastoral Team and Board is to keep the farm operating at its current scale but to deepen engagement with (i) our own church members, (ii) the broader community, and (iii) our food recipient partners. This will enable the farm to be better integrated with other ministry areas and to contribute more substantially to our vision.

Our own church members

Initiatives to deepen the farming experience for our own church community could include the following:

- *Prayer*—Establish a prayer station in the farm plot (possibly a bench and a sign with prayer topics and/or a meditation exercise), and consider holding a contemplative farming retreat.
- *Food justice*—Increase education about food insecurity in Montgomery County through signage on and around the farm.
- *Youth engagement*—Be more proactive in creating farm events specifically for, or attractive to, our own young people; and help children and youth to engage in food distribution.
- *Events*—Increase the frequency of farm events with live music, refreshments, etc.
- *Ecology*—Increase awareness of the importance of ecological health in the food system through inclusion on the website, in farm signage, and other literature.
- *Influence*—Equip and encourage community members to apply learning from the farm in their own gardens, food buying choices, meal preparation, and engagement in food justice issues.
- *Hosting volunteers*—Investigate the possibility of hosting farm interns/volunteers for the summer (housed in the restored farmhouse).

The broader community

Initiatives to deepen our connection with the broader community through the farm could include the following:

- *Publicity*—Improve outreach through news articles in local media about the purpose and work of the farm. Develop roadside signage, and promote interaction via social media (selfies at the farm, Snapchat geofilters, etc.)
- *Community hub*—Investigate the feasibility of purchasing goats, chickens and/or other animals to create more of a community attraction. The farm could be regularly opened to the public (e.g., on the first Saturday morning of the month).
- *Events*—Building on the success of the Harvest Festival, invite community members onto the property for other farm-based events (e.g., Earth Day, Thanksgiving meal, interfaith events). In addition, participate in more community events such as Maryland History Day, to increase awareness of the farm.
- *Partnerships*—Actively identify and engage other groups to work regularly on the farm, such as the nearby mosque, other churches, local schools, etc.

Our food recipient partners

Initiatives to deepen our relationships with our food recipient partners could include the following:

- *Field trips*—Explore the feasibility of bringing groups of students from Greencastle Elementary School to the farm (and hives) on field trips, and include demonstrations of food preparation.

- *Nutrition support*—Develop recipes and basic cooking advice, including how to incorporate fresh vegetables with typical food items such as ground beef, canned beans, canned sauces and basic grains. Investigate options for holding cooking classes for low-income families.
- *Food distribution*—Hold a weekly free farmers’ market in a suitable location (potentially near Greencastle School or the East County Community Center) to distribute the produce directly to low-income families. Encourage neighboring farmers to also contribute crops. Consider investment in a truck for deliveries, at a future date.
- *Guatemala*—Investigate the potential to distribute food through or near Riverdale Elementary School.
- *Ongoing outreach activities*—Commit to supporting food recipient partners through Service Days and other outreach activities to develop multifaceted relationships.