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Shalom Farm:

Growing Food, Family and Friends

By Jonah Fogel and Rev. David Cooper

The Shalom Farm is a faith-based food-security project, initiated in the spring of 2008. The project was developed in a partnership between the United Methodist Urban Ministries of Richmond (UMUMR), a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization, and Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE).

The goals of the project are to increase access to healthy foods in the inner city, build community, and improve the self-sufficiency of those involved.

Richmond, Virginia, has a rich and diverse history. Many great Americans have

connections to the place such as Edgar Allen Poe, Patrick Henry, Maggie L. Walker, and Arthur Ashe. A patchwork of neighborhoods has emerged over time. In some areas of the city, high poverty exists which often leads to the following problems: limited access to fresh, healthy

foods; residents with higher incidence of nutrition related diseases like obesity and diabetes; high crime rates; and poor school performance. Considering these issues, and mindful of substantially increased demands on food banks, UMUMR and VCE have teamed up along with three low-income neighborhoods to bring Shalom Farm into being.

Shalom Farm is composed of three interrelated parts. First, a 780-acre United Methodist camp in rural Goochland County (forty minutes west of Richmond) is host to the Shalom Farm site. Ground will be broken in March 2009 on two acres. This farm site uses a high-yield design to grow ten crops producing 16,000 pounds of fresh nutritious food for the hungry. Volunteers will staff the farm and they come from a variety of backgrounds and locations including area churches, synagogues, mosques, and civic, government, NGOs and various community organizations. The crops and growing techniques used at the farm were chosen to be easily replicable by volunteers looking to create gardens of their own in the inner city or elsewhere. The farm is dedicated to growing nutritious food for the hungry and teaching the hungry to grow their own food for personal use or for sale.

Second, Virginia Cooperative Extension is developing an educational curriculum to teach children and adults alike about gardening, nutritious eating, and food preservation. The curriculum is a train-the-trainer model, meaning that community volunteers can be taught to be instructors. The curriculum being developed is for use with Shalom Farm participants and other similar projects within Virginia.

The youth curriculum is being designed with public school students in mind. Learning objectives of the educational program are coordinated with the state's standardized testing benchmarks, known as the Standards of Learning. UMUMR has

formed partnerships with three inner-city schools to offer after-school programming and camp experiences at the Shalom Farm. Through this partnership, Shalom Farm will provide eighty youth (and their parents) exposure to the curriculum in 2009-2010 school year.

Third, the Shalom Farm project uses an asset-based community development (ABCD) model called Communities of Shalom to catalyze neighborhood empowerment. Asset-Based Community Development was originally created by the Community Development Program at Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research. Proponents of the approach focus on helping citizens come together and identify strategies to solve their own problems; using the skills and talents available amongst the neighborhood's residents; and better utilizing outside resources.

In Hebrew, the word shalom has multiple meanings, including "well-being." The Communities of Shalom model was developed by the United Methodist Church as a positive and holistic community-driven response to the riots in Los Angeles, California, in 1992. Now Drew University of Madison, New Jersey, serves as the international resourcing and training center for Communities of Shalom and continues to support and expand the program. Over ninety Shalom Zones (sites) exist across the U.S. and Africa.

In Metro Richmond, UMUMR currently employs the Communities of Shalom model with issues outside of food security impacting issues such as racial reconciliation. One existing and two emerging Communities of Shalom (of which there are a total of ten in Richmond) have already agreed to participate in the Shalom Farm project and look forward

to establishing community gardens or cooking programs in their neighborhoods.

Food security is an increasingly important issue across the country, and food itself continues to be an engaging and powerful force in bringing people together. Since its inception in 2008, the Shalom Farm has gathered an impressive array of community supporters including such organizations as the United Way and the Central Virginia Food Bank. The Shalom Farm will begin delivering its healthful social, economic, physical, and spiritual benefits to Metro Richmond in 2009 and beyond. 🏠

Authors' Picks for Further Reading

Asset-based Community Development

🏠 <http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/abcd/>

Communities of Shalom

🏠 <http://www.communitiesofshalom.org/>

Food Security

🏠 <http://www.foodsecurity.org/>

About the Authors

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