News
EarthBeat



Rev. Anna Woofenden. (AP/RNS/Courtesy photo)

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In 2014, the Rev. Anna Woofenden moved to Los Angeles to try a bold experiment: to reenvision church as an outdoor community centered on a garden. As a church, the community would grow food, prepare it and eat it together, and share it with the neighborhood.

What happened next is a story she chronicles in her beautiful memoir " This Is God's Table: Finding Church Beyond the Walls, " out just in time for Earth Day. Moving and full of innovative ideas at any time, now that a pandemic is upending all the ways we traditionally do church, it feels prophetic. — JKR

Why did you found the Garden Church?

The Garden Church grew out of my hunger, and my questions about how we reconnect to our food, to the Earth, to each other and to God or a spiritual community. There was a curiosity about would happen if you did all four of those things in the same place and overlapping. So it started in an empty lot on the outskirts of LA, where we created an urban farm and outdoor sanctuary, a place where people could work together, worship together and eat together.

It was a bold and wild idea. I embodied the Holy Fool and took a big risk and had no idea whether it was going to work or not. And many people wondered the same thing.

What was involved in fundraising and finding a space?

We were able to bring together a cultivation team of more than 100 people around the world who committed to praying for us, to pledge in some way, from seminary students giving $10 a month to other people giving large grants. When I started it was just me, but it was also people across the globe who were holding the vision.

When I arrived, I did a lot of listening and walking the streets of San Pedro. Where are the empty lots? Where are people hungry? What are the gifts and the needs of

this community? It was in that prayerful walking that we found the empty lot on Sixth Street that became the Garden Church.

Describe what that space looked like.

It's a narrow lot in between two buildings. It had a sagging fence at the back made out of landscape material and a nice, green, wrought-iron fence at the front that had always been locked. Occasionally the space would be used for a Christmas tree lot or a beer garden, but it was mostly empty. We discovered lots of nails and broken glass and years of debris that had been packed into the soil. I could also mention the 12-foot, garishly painted dinosaur, but that probably takes too much to explain!

That sounds like it was a huge job. How did you make this a church?

I had to keep showing up every day. That meant talking to a lot of people, and partnering with a local farmer so we could work together to build above-ground garden beds and plant all sorts of seedlings. It meant figuring out how to do worship outside, with wind blowing over shade tents and the noise of traffic and sirens going by. And it meant stretching my heart to be ready to see the image of God in everyone who walked through the gate, no matter who it was.

What happened?

On May 1 of 2015, we took a big cedar stump, placed it in the center of this empty lot, anointed it with oil and consecrated it as God's table, where all are welcome to feed and be fed.

And then people started being drawn around God's table, to work in the garden and cultivate food together, to worship with the earth beneath our feet and the sky above our heads, to share in the sacred meal of Holy Communion and then to share in the large community meal of farm-to-table dinner that we had all grown and cultivated together.



Planting beds at the Garden Church in San Pedro, California (AP/RNS)

So sharing food is a big part of church?

The Eucharist or Communion has always been really central to my understanding of what it means to be church. I find deep power in sharing in that explicit sacrament and seeing how it informs all of our eating. There is something sacred in the food that we eat and in coming together around a table to eat with others.

Those of us that had houses and kitchens would come and harvest on Friday, then cook and bring the food back on Sunday. And those who didn't have kitchens would help to plant the carrot seeds or water the tomatoes. Everyone participated in some way, so it was truly a communal meal and experience. And we would all sit down together.

For about half the people, that was their one chance to have a hot meal that day. And many of us, if we weren't there, we would have been in our apartments by ourselves. So we were all hungry for something as we came around those tables.

There's a lot of talk these days about how to do church differently and get outside our traditional boxes. What did you learn about that?

I think the Garden Church and dinner churches and the variety of different ways of being church that we see sprouting up are all circling around this question: What does it mean to be faithful in this generation? Church has changed throughout the generations, so it's not about being new or cool or different right now. We're still just being church. It's more about asking: What is the context we're currently in, and what are the hungers? Where are the areas where we need to reconnect? And how do we do that in a way that is faithful to our current context and this current generation?

Did the church have a lot of younger adults?

We were a very multigenerational congregation, but the bulk of the core were boomers who were disenfranchised with their church experience. They provided a stability to the group that was a real gift. I was surprised. I thought we would have a much younger, eclectic group of millennials — queer, rejected from other churches. Those folks were there, they were definitely involved, but not as much of the core as I anticipated.

One thing I learned is that you don't get to decide who is going to be the church. You make church together based on who shows up and what they need.

Where does your church connect with a larger concern many people have with spirituality and the Earth?

There is a whole movement across the country and the world of churches that are looking to connect agriculture and theology, food and faith. I am inspired by how many people are asking those questions, and the groups and idea and resources that are springing up.

For example, I have colleagues who founded Farm Church in Durham, North Carolina, and the Keep & Till in rural Maryland. Nurya Love Parish founded Plainsong Farm in Michigan and also is the founder of the Christian Food Movement website, where you can find hundreds of groups that are working at this intersection of food and faith. Also there is the Food and Faith Podcast.

What advice do you have for people who are reimagining church now because of the pandemic?

One thing that became clear to me in reimagining church is that the church is flexible and can persist. God is willing to show up wherever we show up and however we gather.

So while doing virtual church during this pandemic is in some ways as far from the Garden Church as possible, because we can't meet and eat together, in other ways it's exactly the same thing: How do we reimagine gathering as the body of Christ in this context? What I see is a creativity and an expansion of our thinking about what it means to be faithful with each other, and a sense that God is present, whatever our context may be.

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