Digging deep to grow community

It is often said that one is never closer to God than in the garden. Salvationist eco-theologian Matt Seaman goes deeper and outlines a number of benefits from getting back to nature and building community through working the earth.

In last month’s Pipeline, we read about two wonderful projects (Bayside Blitz pp.18-21, and Service Sunday pp.28-29). Community groups, businesses and Salvation Army church families came together to spend time outside doing, repairing, learning, sharing and caring.

Landscaping gardens and paths, installing water tanks, planting herb and vegetable gardens, and even building chicken coops were part of the constructive community-focused projects.

I have to admit, I was rather excited to read about those wonderful stories! They brought to mind the closing line from a wonderful poem by Wendell Berry, which is simply: “Practice resurrection.”

Following on from these stories, it seems relevant to spend some time considering how ministry in touch with God’s creation has been encouraged. For example, Berry’s plan involved supporting people to move from crowded and dirty city situations to smaller rural towns and farming communities. There was a view that farming was “work which healed and made people whole and drew them into rhythm with God.”

Community research

I see clear links between increased understanding of the biblical imperative to care for the entirety of the earth and being aware of and actively seeking ways in which we as Salvationists can be more in tune with the rhythms of God and God’s creation. This can happen in lots of different ways, of course. From recycling (Pipeline, Nov 2013), being wise with water (Pipeline, Oct 2013), what we do with, put in and on our bodies (Pipeline, Jun, Jul and Aug 2014), reducing our energy use at home and in Salvation Army corps and centres, through to ministries such as Salvation Army-based farms and community gardens.

Over the past year, I have been deeply grateful for the opportunity to undertake research enabled by The Salvation Army Fellows Scholarship. This research specifically involved visiting community gardens and farms linked in with the local expression of The Salvation Army, looking at the tangible benefits and potential issues that have emerged from the projects, and to see what more can be done to strengthen and encourage this area within Salvation Army work and ministry.

The Fellows Scholarship research experiences have been encouraging, enlightening and challenging! For those who like statistics, I visited 26 Salvation Army centres in six territories and conducted nearly 30 hours of interviews with more than 45 people involved in community gardens and farming ventures within the United States, New Zealand and Australia. There is still a lot of work to do to complete the research. I hope and pray that it will be of benefit not just to those who are involved in and assisted by The Salvation Army, but also to the broader church, society and for all of God’s creation.

Even as the research is not yet complete, I’d love to share some of the wide range of beneficial outcomes that can arise from getting back in touch with the earth in community. Benefits can be experienced in areas such as: Health and well-being: Having a direct connection with our food source affirms that God has provided good food for our nourishment in the form of plants that grow straight from the soil, not from a packet. It is in the form of plants – fruits and vegetables – where we find nourishment, fibre, vitamins and minerals. A number of people I have interviewed stated that having gardening as part of their community support and food banks has been beneficial in this area.

Financially: Being more responsible stewards of resources, energy and materials can only improve the financial situation for The Salvation Army and its centres, and also for those who aim to be responsible stewards of God’s gifts and blessings.

Evangelistically: We can find new ways to share and live out the gospel in our local communities. Increased awareness of environmental issues and community-focused gardening schemes within The Salvation Army is a positive and wonderful point of resonance with many in today’s society. To share a common concern for the earth with the community, and communicating the message of love and hope that Jesus has for all of Earth has great potential for growing the kingdom of God (Pipeline, Apr 2014).

Psychologically: Throughout my research people have expressed contentment and felt closer to God when spending time in the garden and out in nature. This also links in with the early Salvationist Frederick Booth-Tucker’s views on farming communities as re-uniting “the labourer with the manless land.”

Spiritually: An increasingly holistic view of God’s web of life and our place within it can bring an increased sense of wonder, praise and of giving of glory to God through worship – not just on Sunday but in everyday actions such as getting out in the garden.

Nurturing instinct

An officer from the United States noted that “gardening is nurturing and our work – Salvation Army work – is about nurturing people’s lives.”

And an Australian officer mentioned the holistic and far-reaching character of Christ-like care and compassion: “If you’re not looking after the plants, and the animals, then you’re probably not looking after anything. Do you need to look after the people before you look after the plants, the animals, the sky, the seas and the rest of creation? Or is there in fact a oneness about it?”

I’m excited by the projects I have seen, by the stories of people who have linked their faith to the land on which they live. Might there be an opportunity in your local community and church family to begin something new, or partner with others to bring about life and healing to people, community and creation through gardening?

How might we imaginatively and thoughtfully follow in the way of Jesus?

Let us continue to “practice resurrection”.

Matt Seaman attends Nambour Corps and is The Salvation Army representative for the Qld Churches Environmental Network.

Matt Seaman has created a Facebook page called “Salvation Army Farming, Gardening and Ecology Network (SAFGEN)” as an online space for networking, sharing information, stories and encouragement about worldwide Salvation Army work such as community gardening and farming projects. The SAFGEN Facebook page is available at: www.facebook.com/tsafgen