

the land Redeemed

• A CHURCH FARM IN THE CITY •

By The Rev. Canon Andrew Gross

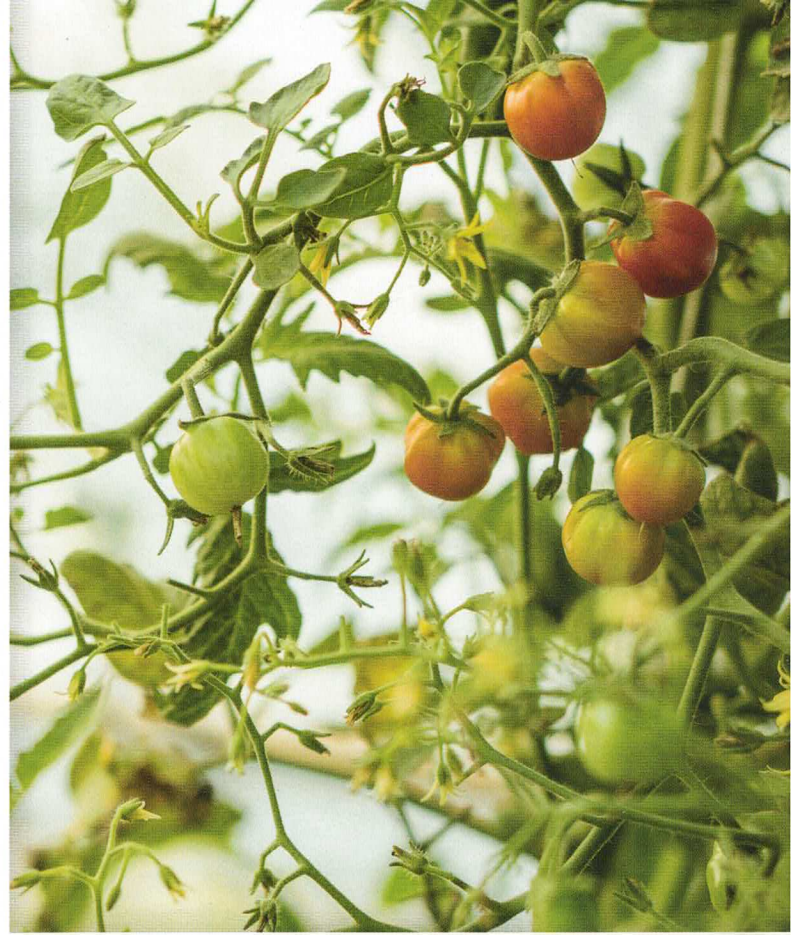
Inside the city limits of Greensboro, North Carolina there is a farm. Unlike many of the farms that border urban America, this one hasn't been grandfathered into the expanding city limits of urban sprawl. This farm is brand new; a small attempt to reclaim the land and create a place of renewal for the whole community.

In the previous decades, this property, which borders the regional airport and the intersection of two interstate highways in the northwest corner of the city, was owned by a local nursery and landscaping company. When a Home Depot was built at the next exit up the freeway, the fate of the local company was sealed, but in its place has grown a worshipping community with a big vision: a church, a farm, a park, a monastic community, homes for the disabled, and business space for entrepreneurs.

Church of the Redeemer bought the property in 2016, and on the face of things the location was a perfect fit. The former showroom would become the sanctuary, and the greenhouse, built-in irrigation, and hoop-houses could be restored to support the farm. Below the surface, however, there were real problems.

"The property was covered in eight inches of crushed gravel and below that was compacted clay with no organic matter," laughs Farm Director, Lena Van Wyke. The nursery had brought in the plants and trees to sell them here, but they hadn't grown anything in the ground at this location. What tillable soil might have once been there was long gone, replaced by enough rocks to keep heavy trucks carrying trees from sinking into the mud.

If the land was to become a farm, it would take ingenuity and a lot of hard work. Backhoes were brought in to remove the rock. Trenches three feet deep were filled with woodchips

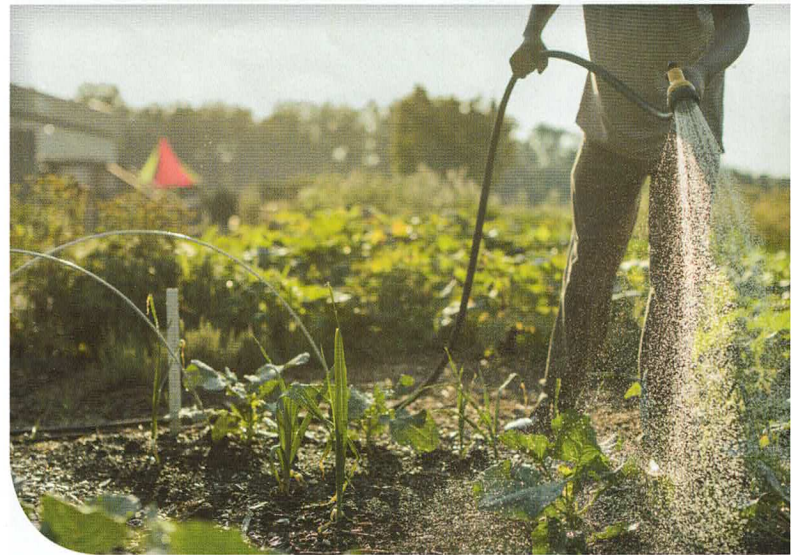


to combat both flooding and drought. In a rare moment of collaboration between collegiate rivals, the dining halls of the University of North Carolina and Duke University contributed compost.



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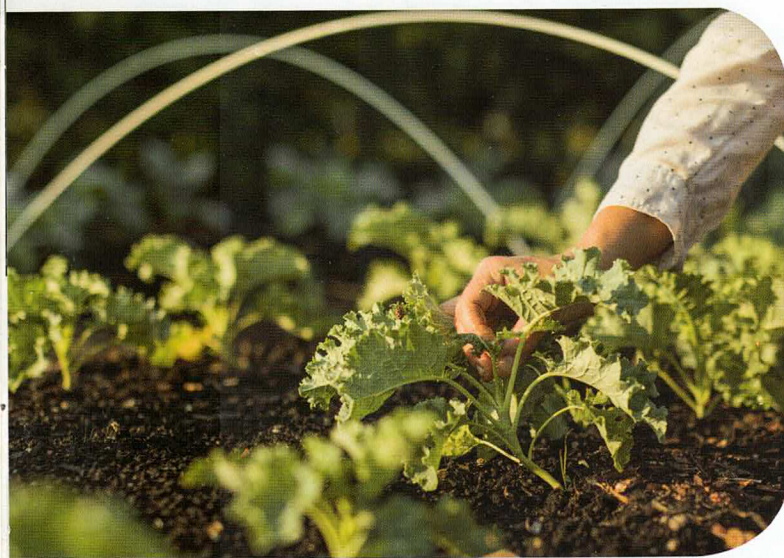
In the first year, fourteen families were willing to purchase shares in the farm despite the fact that it hadn't yet produced a single tomato. Every week the farm staff worked and prayed, and every week there was just enough. There is now a quarter acre of farmable land producing 40 kinds of vegetables on an annual schedule. Having seen the Lord's provision, Lena exudes a humble confidence, "God's glory is shining in our having to work from scratch and watch Him literally renew the face of the ground."





As a student at Duke Divinity school, Lena was headed towards a career in academia before finding herself drawn to community-based farming. “God radically changed my heart. I don’t know if I can put my finger on exactly how. He cools certain desires and enlivens different desires. I received a call from the Lord to not just study it, but to do it.”

Lena has been joined in the work by a unique cast of colleagues. John MacEntyre “Mack” Allen, a retired chemical engineer and jack-of-all trades, tackles the next improvement project on a list as large as the overall vision. Naomi, a Great Pyrenees farm dog alternates between playing with children and guests and guarding the crops from groundhogs and rabbits. Julia, who grew up in Uganda and Kenya, meticulously documents the latest experiments and sets a working pace that isn’t easy to keep up with. Countless volunteers help plant, harvest, and improve the land.



As we walk through the farm, Lena points to a row of Congolese eggplant. This particular section of the farm is made up of east African vegetables because Church of the Redeemer has a large number of east African members who have resettled to Greensboro. For these families who are rebuilding their lives in a new country, the church provides familiar worship, the farm provides familiar tastes from home, and the market provides a familiar process as Julia is willing to bargain in Swahili.

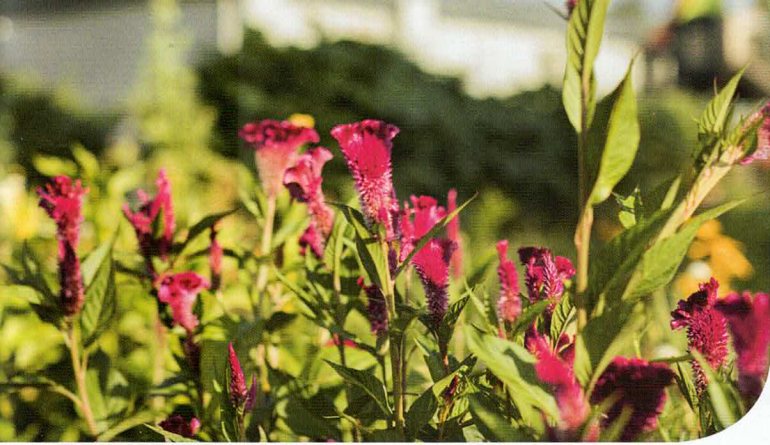


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“We are a farm as a parish for the parish,” says Lena. “The biblical narrative begins and ends in a garden. Revelation chapter 22 presents a vision of the redeemed creation as a garden city in which all nations will come together. We are learning to think of God as our provider and developing a deep attachment to this place.”

In addition to the church and farm, part of the vision for the 8-acre property is a park with a walking trail to benefit the local community. Down by the creek there is a grove of forgotten, exotic trees left unattended when the nursery closed. Defiantly, they sent roots out through the holes in their burlap wrappings and have now established themselves. Mack, the Park Director, is hopeful that the walking path will eventually wind down their rows and back up to the farm.



The title of park director could be a bit misleading in two directions at once. On the one hand, there isn't yet a park to direct, and on the other hand Mack seems to be undergirding a little bit of everything in the parish, not just the plans for the park. He can diagnose computer network problems, explain the merits and challenges of hydroponics, and engage in Christian apologetics. He holds in his head the master plan for the property. His goal is to help build something that will stand the test of time, and at heart he's a teacher who loves passing on skills to the next generation. A geothermal project is underway in his on-campus workshop as an experiment. "Air is blown through tubes in the ground and it comes up at 50 to 55 degrees. During the summer, half of the cooling in my workshop is now coming from these 'earth tubes.' I figured out that I can put 600 feet of four-inch piping in an eight-foot ditch between the hoop-houses to keep them from freezing this winter," says Mack.

It would be easy to write off the church's big vision as mere dreaming if it weren't for the very practical people who have felt God's calling to the work. Wherever one looks, there is visible progress. The church is well established. The farm is producing crops. Improvements are currently being made to

the greenhouse to make it a multi-use space. A side chapel made of iron-jointed cedar was recently completed by the resident Anglican Benedictine order. Day in and day out, idealistic pragmatists show up to take the next small steps. A young theologian who left academia sinks her fingernails into the dirt. A retired engineer emerges from his workshop with a hand-crafted solution to the day's latest challenge, and behind them is a supportive church community with volunteers who faithfully show up to help each month.

Only a fraction of the vision has been completed. It is far from perfect. But every day a little more gravel and a little more clay give way to the garden.



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