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God's Garden of Eatin'

07.23.2009 | Catholic, Service and Giving This summer, some graduate students in religious studies are getting valuable field experience.

Led by religious studies doctoral candidate Sue Sack, they've been working in a three-parish community garden on the grounds of St. Paul Catholic Church in Englewood and in another at Sack's home in Clay Township, Ohio. Now, five local food pantries and senior living centers and the thousands of families they serve are reaping the fruits of their labor — fresh cucumbers, tomatoes, squash, pumpkins, broccoli, corn, cabbage, peppers, potatoes and more.

Sack and a group of volunteers from St. Paul, Precious Blood and St. Rita parishes resurrected the project, called God's Garden of Eatin', in 2008 after it lay fallow for several years. Today, it's propagated with the helping hands of parishioners, UD students and anyone else Sack can recruit.

In 2008, the plots produced more than 2,000 pounds of fresh produce for those in need.

"Since we have been working hard to replenish the soil with manure and organic matter, hopefully we will get even more this year, God and the weather willing," Sack said.

Besides feeding the hungry, Sack and her fellow graduate students have helped teach sustainable lifestyles through weekend "seminars" at the Sack homestead and at the parish garden.

"It's been a wonderful community-building and community-supporting event," Sack said. "My hope is that as the word gets out that this is a viable form of social action, other churches and institutions will also give it a shot. ... As state and federal aid is cut to food bank programs, the holes have to be filled somehow."

Those holes are multiplying: The Kettering, Ohio, food pantry operated by Greenmont-Oak Park Community Church and Ascension Catholic Church has seen annual demand double, from 801 families in 2002 to 1,566 in 2008, reports Sack, whose parents, Jerry and Georgi Kassmasn, volunteer there.

That growth is consistent with what pantries are seeing in Montgomery, Greene and Preble counties, said Linda Roepken, an associate executive officer of The Foodbank Dayton, the local affiliate of Feeding America, formerly America's Second Harvest.

"We've seen a 24 percent increase in demand for the fiscal year ending June 30, and that followed a 20 percent increase the previous year," Roepken said. "We moved 4 million pounds of food in the last year, up from 3.2 million pounds in 2007-08." For 2009-10, Roepken projects that number will grow to 5.5 million pounds.

Sack and her volunteers will share the gardens' bounty until the end of the growing season; then they'll till under the buckwheat and ryegrass they planted to nourish the soil for next year.

For Sack, the effort has been a labor of both love and vocation.

"The further I get into this process, the more I am aware that the theology I read must be integrated into my own life and express itself in action," Sack said. "I do not understand how this course of study could be solely an intellectual exercise; if one allows God into one's life, that presence must be expressed both through the physical and the intellectual, in both the personal and the communal relationships that result. It is necessary to act upon the joint movements of the heart and the mind."

Sack says anyone with a garden can grow food for the hungry — either by donating surplus from an existing garden or by "planting a row for the hungry," adding a row at the start of the season and committing to give its bounty to a food pantry. For information, see the Plant a Row (url: <http://www.gardenwriters.org/gwa.php?p=par/index.htm>) Web site or contact The Foodbank Dayton (url: <http://www.thefoodbankdayton.org/plant-a-row.php>) at 937-461-0265.