

Ekklesia Acres: Church-based gardening

by [Holly Kays](#) in the [March 10, 2009](#) issue

Don Charles grips a broadfork, his feet invisible beneath displaced straw from the potato row. The tool is a cross between a rake and a shovel and rises to chest height on most people. Charles bends his 6'7" frame to grip the handles at his waist and plants his weight on the metal beam connecting handles and teeth. The teeth begin to penetrate the ground's matted surface, revealing a rich mix of fluffy soil and lumpy potatoes.

This is Ekklesia Acres, the fulfillment of a dream for Charles, a member of Dale Ridge Church of Christ in the tiny town of Cloverdale, Virginia. For years, the quarter-acre plot of land behind the church was unused except for an occasional hay harvest. But when Charles regularly volunteered at the Roanoke Rescue Mission, which provides daily free, hot meals to single moms, drug addicts, disabled people and others, he saw how difficult it was for the mission to find fresh, healthy food. Charles decided to use the church plot to feed poor people in Roanoke.

Charles conceived the idea for Ekklesia Acres after attending an aquaponics workshop near Bryson City, North Carolina, in the Smoky Mountains. *Aquaponics* is a combination of the terms *aquaculture*, or fish farming, and *hydroponics*, the cultivation of plants without soil. "Basically," explains Charles, "you grow fish in a tank and you circulate the nutrient-rich water [that fish excrete] through a trough and float Styrofoam trays on top of these troughs. You can plant vegetables or whatever in there, and they suck the nutrients out of the water."

Initially Charles attended because he wanted to learn how to become more self-sufficient. But when he met missionaries who were learning how to help people in developing countries grow food in new ways, he emerged from the workshop with a newfound conviction: "It's not about me," he says. "Being a Christian means thinking about other people."

Charles talked with an elder from Dale Ridge about using the land behind the church to begin a garden, and when the church agreed, Charles began to plant in the spring of 2008.

Dennis Dove, co-owner of Full Circle Organic Farm in Floyd, Virginia, was excited about Charles's plan and donated tomato plants, pepper plants and several eggplants to the garden. Even more valuable than the plants was Dove's advice—he has 17 years of experience in organic gardening.

Meanwhile, the garden needed a name. "We were trying to think of a name for a community of believers who would live together and focus their time on helping others," said Charles. His sister came up with Ekklesia Acres—*ekklesia* being the Greek word for a community of Christians. Several different groups helped Charles tend the garden, including members of the Dale Ridge congregation and the Blacksburg Church of Christ. "Part of what it means to be a Christian," he says, "is working together and helping each other."

Charles often refers to Matthew 25, in which Jesus talks about people responding to the needs of "the least of these." "I'd never really looked at it like that," says Charles. "Just anybody who needed help." He easily determined who should receive his vegetables that first year. "There were two [Christian] families," he remembers, "but most of the food went to the rescue mission."

The first harvest was substantial. A total of 450 hours of labor during the summer yielded 1,550 pounds of squash, zucchini, tomatoes, corn, sweet potatoes, green beans, onions, peppers and potatoes.

Now Charles is turning his thoughts to next season. Much is uncertain. He has already determined that Ekklesia Acres will not be located at Dale Ridge next year; transportation from the site to the rescue mission is too expensive, and more important, Charles wants the people receiving the food to be involved in the project.

Long-term plans for the garden involve creating "a model of sustainable agriculture" by incorporating several acres of farmland, an aquaponic setup and renewable energy sources. To make this happen, Charles is considering other plots of land in the Roanoke area. He may plant a garden in a small plot near the rescue mission, but it's not large enough to allow for expansion, and Charles does not want to be tied to a particular organization.

But although the garden's next location is uncertain, excitement about his ministry guarantees the future of Ekklesia Acres. "Service is supposed to be our primary focus as Christians," Charles says. "We're supposed to be living sacrifices. It's my will last."