

Surprised by volunteers

By [Lee Hull Moses](#)

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Two weeks ago, I was in my office getting ready for worship when a church member stopped by with a cherry tomato. A small, single tomato, which he handed to me. Then he pointed out my window toward the front yard of the church. “We’ve got a couple of tomato plants growing out there,” he said. Volunteer plants, we surmised, left over from the small raised-bed garden we’d set up a few years ago, before our garden ministry really took off and we moved it to a much larger plot off site.

“Ah-ha!” I thought to myself, and I thanked Jim for providing the prop I needed for the children’s sermon I was still working out. I’d already planned to talk about the garden; we were doing a blessing for the garden anyway, and any mention of dirt and sunshine goes over well with the kids. But now I had the visual aid that would seal the deal.

When the children’s sermon came, I sat on the steps with the kids and we talked about what it takes to grow a garden. Hard work, soil, sunshine, water. (They knew more details than I did—there was some mention of carbon dioxide and photosynthesis, which is more science than I’ve studied in years.) We talked about how sometimes, all that hard work pays off in a harvest of vegetables, but sometimes, something goes wrong and the plants don’t produce much at all.

Then I triumphantly held up the cherry tomato and said, with exaggerated enthusiasm, how amazing it is that it was just growing in the yard, having been planted by nobody, simply a seed transplanted there by the miracles of nature. I was quite proud of the point I made, about how sometimes God surprises us with gifts we aren’t expecting. The kids oohed and ahed (or so I told myself), we prayed, and they scurried down the aisle to children’s church as I returned to the pulpit.

I found out later that there was a whole pew of youth group kids and their sponsors giggling and poking each other as I talked about that surprise tomato. After church, one of the girls was the first one out of the sanctuary to tell me why. She grinned at me, as if she had a secret, and then blurted out: “We planted that tomato!” She

laughed and laughed, delighted to have been part of the unintentional conspiracy.

When I thought about it, I remembered the group out there one Sunday night a couple months ago. I knew they had planted flowers. They probably even told me about the tomato.

I can admit when I'm wrong; that tomato wasn't quite the surprise I thought it was. So let me revise my message: Sometimes God surprises us. And sometimes, God works through people who carefully tend the soil and make miracles happen right before our eyes.