

Growing a garden church from food scraps and compost

We turned an empty lot in L.A. into an edible sanctuary.

by [Anna Woofenden](#) in the [January 16, 2019](#) issue



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When I moved to Los Angeles in 2014 to start a church that connected people with food, the earth, each other, and God, I envisioned a sanctuary created around the table. It would not be built out of stones and stained glass and wood but would be circled by vegetable beds and fruit trees, with sky for ceiling and earth for floor. The vision was to create an urban farm and outdoor sanctuary feeding people in body, mind, and spirit.

In the early months, the Garden Church wandered from public park to downtown street corner. We walked the neighborhood and listened to our neighbors, finding out which grocery stores had fresh vegetables and noticing the homeless encampments, the schools, the clinics, and the empty lots.

Before we had a plot of land to cultivate together, we asked our team: What do we have? What are the resources that are already here and how can we use them to nurture this dream?

What we had was food scraps, a generous urban farmer down the street with a big compost bin, and people who were ready and wanting to do something to prepare the soil—literally—for the Garden Church to grow.

After seven months or so of composting and wandering, we finally found our plot of land. Each week we gathered there around a cedar stump table, in the middle of an empty lot turned edible sanctuary, with the waft of compost in the background. We brought together people who had been burned by church or never entered one. Some went to mass in the mornings and the Garden Church in the afternoon. Others were agnostics, post-evangelicals, mainliners, and all sorts of spiritual but not religious. They came together because something about church outside in a garden drew them in.

The compost piles also drew them, as more and more community members started saving their food scraps in five-gallon buckets and bringing their compost each week. Rotting food scraps on their kitchen counter reminded people to come to worship every Sunday afternoon.

“Where’s the church?” was a question we often fielded as people walked in. “Right here,” we’d reply. “No, where’s the church?” they would ask again. “Right here,” we’d say again, and point to the benches circled around the cedar stump table, surrounded by garden beds. “This is where we have worship on Sunday afternoons; we sing and pray and read scripture and share communion. And the picnic tables there are where we share a meal together after. This is all church.”

Worship was never exactly how I had planned it. Interruptions during the sermon were not the exception but the norm. I might have to pause to break up a dog fight—or a human fight. As I stood with my arms lifted in mid-communion consecration, I might have to wait for a gang of 25-plus motorcycles to pass. We wove the sound of the fire sirens into the prayers of the people.

Grandmothers and little children, downtown lawyers, construction workers, and people recovering from addiction all sat and shared a meal together. On any given Sunday you might find a weathered man who'd been living on the streets planting beet seeds with a six-year-old with autism—a child whose mother was once asked to leave their former church because her son was “disruptive.”

One day James was walking down the street with a colleague, both in suits and carrying briefcases, when they heard a voice call out, “Hey, James!” The speaker wore camo shorts and was sitting on a bench near the alley he slept in at night. James replied without missing a beat, “Hey, Derek! How’s it going?” As James and his colleague continued to walk down the street, the colleague turned to him and asked, “How do you know him?” At that moment Derek’s friend, sitting next to him on the bench, asked the same question. “From church!” Derek and James both replied.

In our little neighborhood one of the starkest and most contentious divides is between housed and unhoused neighbors. I quickly found that everyone had a strong opinion about this topic. This divide became something we paid particular attention to as we tried to live out our commitment to “gather around God’s table where all are welcome to feed and be fed.” Whenever anyone walked through the gate it was the job of those already inside to welcome that person and look for the image of God embedded in the newcomer. “What are they hungry for?” “What do they have to offer, to feed others?” This sanctuary was not a place for the nice middle-class church people to help out “those poor, hungry people,” but instead a place where we could all experience our humanity together, all hungry, all able to feed.

On one of our first Fridays with the Garden Church open, I watched a grandmother in her pressed white pants observing Deena in her dirt-stained shirt carefully chalking the word “welcome” on our sandwich board sign. After Deena was done, the woman said to me, “I’ve always thought those homeless people couldn’t do anything useful, but look at her, she’s doing such a beautiful job on the sign!” I tried to control my face as I said, “Yes, Deena is an important part of our community.”

“Where’s the church?” people often asked. “Right here,” we’d reply.

Deena had come the first Sunday we’d been open, having seen the sign on the front gate. She came in during worship and sat down. She offered a quiet prayer request

during prayer time and gently said, “Yes, please,” when she was offered a bowl of soup during dinner. She shared that she had some agricultural experience and would come back during the week and help us plant. On Tuesday she dove into planting tomatoes and beans. On Friday she came back, and we began building benches for the sanctuary out of 4x4 beams and cinder blocks. When Deena came back again on Sunday, I saw her sitting on a bench and grinning broadly. As I walked over to her, she said, “It feels so good to sit on something that I helped make with my hands.”

We were frequently surprised by what happens when you mix planting artichokes and saying prayers. One morning a young man came in with his mom, who had been crying. “My dad died a few days ago,” he shared with me in his limited English, “and we’re so sad.” I talked a bit with his mom as the son hovered behind her. “Can we pray with you?” I asked. “And can we plant this rosemary bush in the prayer garden to remember him by?” They both nodded through the tears.

I gathered everyone who was working in the garden, and we put our hands on their shoulders and prayed along with their tears. I then bent down and invited the boy to join me as we put our trowels into the earth and dug a hole for the little rosemary plant. “Can I get it some water?” he asked. I nodded, “Yes,” and he poured water on the plant, mixed with his tears.

The boy came back each week that summer and watered the plant faithfully, sometimes on his own, sometimes with his mother, sometimes with a friend. The summer ended, and we stopped seeing him.

Two years later I was pulling up weeds when two gangly teenagers came through the gates. “Do you know where the rosemary plants are?” I heard one of them saying to my colleague who was at the front gate. “Hmm . . . I’m not sure,” he replied and began to look around. I looked up and recognized him: “The rosemary you planted for your dad?” His face lit up. “Yes, it’s right over here. Look how it’s grown!”

In founding and leading the Garden Church, I had to die to many of the ways I thought it could be or would be. What sprouts out of the compost heap are rarely the plants we expect: the peach tree from the pit from last summer, the gigantic squash that you didn’t plant, and the crabgrass that persists even though you thought you were careful not to put it in the bin.

My own heart was also turned over by the compost heap again and again. We didn't get the land we thought we'd like, but then we got the space that turned out to be where life and need came together. People I'd been counting on left, but then others showed up. Funding fell through, but in the end there was enough.

I chanted our well-worn communion prayer: God speaks through outcast men, the pure and impure. God chooses what we despise to make us whole. And I saw our judgments softened and our hard shells cracked by being in community together. I saw this God as the Divine Composter, who takes our best bits and our slimy bits, the crumbs of our joyful moments and the leftovers that we've kept for too long—and says, "Let's see what we can do with this next!"

God takes a big mess of people who didn't belong together and turns us into a church. Dirt dissolves that which separates us; the warmth burns through the illusion that we are anything but fellow humanity and part of creation. We're all together, mortal and human, dust and spirit, all mixed in the divine compost pile.

The names in this article have been changed for reasons of privacy. A version of it appears in the print edition under the title "Compost church."