

## Sowing Seeds on Fertile Ground

Scripture is ripe with images and stories that involve seeds, growth, fruits, gardens and transformation. It is, then, quite apt that members of the Awaken church community in the Bowness area of Calgary finds the act of creating a local community garden a compelling metaphor for how they understand God.



The Awaken community began as a third congregation within Westview Baptist under the pastoral leadership of Scott Cripps. Feeling a call to take a risk and become a distinct congregation with its own unique DNA, Awaken moved to the

Bowness area in September 2007 to live among a working class neighbourhood of about 11,000 along the Bow River. The area has a high percentage of lower income residents and seniors, and about half of the housing is in the form of rental units. With a long-standing vision for reaching out and making connections to this neighbourhood by creating a community garden, the Awaken community found a vacant lot owned by Bow Waters Community Church. The idea for the garden was warmly received by Bow Waters, so Awaken got to work building it.

“This had been a dream for us,” says Scott. “We wanted to do three things: reclaim abandoned land, grow fruits and vegetables to feed those in need, and invite our neighbours into a faith community that believes in an incarnational God amongst us.”

Under the guidance of a few people in the community with knowledge of gardening, they built 16 garden plots, 15 by 4 feet each, trucking in the soil to fill the raised beds, and called it the Bowness Community Garden. These plots were rented out to people in the neighbourhood for a nominal sum of \$10 each. These renters, most of whom have low incomes and live in subsidized housing without the capacity to garden, grow what they wish – mostly vegetables – and keep all of the food they grow. At the end of last September, Awaken held a harvest celebration to celebrate God’s goodness and maintain relationships with community members.

“The garden has had a pretty dramatic effect. We are a small church plant of about 50 people in a tough neighbourhood. By having the garden we are able to demonstrate our posture towards the neighbourhood, to show that we are part of it, that we are contributing to the community and that we have an attitude of welcome,” says Scott. “On top of that, the gardening gives us a vocabulary for faith, painting a wonderful picture about how God reclaims abandoned land, brings us to life, helps us grow....It is very rich and rewarding.”

The garden has been such a success that Awaken plans to help start a second one this fall. “Last year was very much about building and starting. This year, we will be more intentional with more events throughout the year and more direct invitations to participate,” says Scott. “We are seeing more people coming out and, although we haven’t seen much increase in church attendance yet, we are sending the message that we are here for the long haul and that we trust God’s timing.”

Many Canadian Baptist churches have started community gardens, much like Awaken has done. These garden projects are so wonderful because they meet the needs people have for community. Where do people go for face-to-face contact if they don’t have kids in school, or are not athletic, or don’t enjoy the pseudo-community of cyberspace chatrooms? Community gardens are the new gathering places. In fact, they are the new village green for many people. These gardens encourage community, and they do it in a way that honours creation, which is a Biblical notion, encourages community, which is a Biblical notion, and encourages hospitality, which is a Biblical notion and gives people a safe way to step into church. Community gardens do much to realize our Canadian Baptists way of being in which first we belong, then come to belief and then become who God wants us to be.

The community garden movement among our churches is significant: our churches are doing something new here. Instead of passively waiting for the community to come to us, many of our churches are going to the community, reaching out and becoming more relevant to the day-to-day life of the neighbourhood through projects like community gardens. Our churches are learning to speak to their surrounding communities in a new language and through actions that fit the cultural context in which the churches find themselves. In doing so, they make the gospel better understood. This missional outlook means that God will grow our churches even as mainline churches shut their doors, and that God will open hearts to His love.