

Preserving the Season's Bounty "Cannables" Food Preservation Project St. Alban's Episcopal Church Bolivar, Missouri

About a half hour north of Springfield, Missouri, rests Bolivar, a community with a population of around 10,000. Nestled on the west end of town is St. Alban's Episcopal Church, a young church with a small but growing congregation. The size of this congregation's heart, however, greatly outweighs its numbers.

History

St. Alban's kicked off its "Cannables" Food Preservation Project in 2008. It all started at a Bishop's Committee (parish council) meeting early in the spring, when church member Romain Morgan (see photo) presented her idea for an on-site garden where the produce would be donated to local residents. Going a step further, she added food preservation as an important parallel project. The committee told her, "Great idea...do it!" The idea may have come from one person, but as a testament to the congregation at St. Alban's, this has not been a one-person project. More than half of the congregation has been either directly involved or supportive in some way. The Episcopal Diocese of western Missouri heard about their efforts and awarded a grant of \$1,000. St. Alban's used the grant to pay for the purchase of food preservation equipment, including jars, pressure cookers and food dehydrators.

The motivation

"We intend to return in some way to the local food production more common to our ancestors (and still common to our Amish neighbors) partly in order to remind each other that we can grow food...to revive the art of canning, drying and freezing produce so that anyone with a garden can provide food for themselves and others for winter...and to remind each other that we really do have a responsibility to care for each other," says Reverend Cathy Cox.

The project

St. Alban's decided to plant the garden directly outside the church along the full-length windows "so it is visible during worship," says Reverend Cox. Local members donated compost, mulch, fill soil, seeds, plants, use of equipment and lots of time. Others even donated their gardens and orchards to the effort. St. Alban's presently has three



gardens and three orchards from which to harvest. The main goal of the gardens and orchards is to provide both fresh and preserved fruits and vegetables for anyone who wants them. Reverend Cox makes clear that "there will be NO income guidelines for receiving food. Everyone who helps in any way, as well as any of your friends or neighbors who need it, will be invited to come and take the results of this work, take home recipes and attend further canning classes."

In June 2008, a county extension agent was asked to teach church members and others about canning fruits and vegetables. Although there was no advertising for this free class, more than 30 people attended. Further canning classes are scheduled, in addition to freezing and food dehydrating classes. Bob Wagon, an enterprising member of St. Alban's, "obtained three 6-foot long incubators with fans, temperature control and rotating shelves, and remodeled them to use for drying fruit and tomatoes," says Reverend Cox.

As summer moves along, fruits and vegetables become ripe for the picking. Once certain fruits or vegetables are harvested, they are brought to the church for food preservation parties, where anybody can come and help with the canning process. Those who attend do not necessarily have to know how to can, as an experienced canner is present at each preservation party. Everyone present helps prepare the produce, including cleaning and cutting the fruits and vegetables. Others can their produce at home and deliver it to the church.

Due to the volume expected from the gardens and orchards, a large number of people will benefit from this project. More than 300 tomato vines were planted. But to be successful, a large number of canning jars are needed. Individuals have donated numerous jars from their own supplies while others have purchased new cases and dropped them off at church anonymously.

Once the canning, freezing or drying is completed, the finished products will be distributed to anyone wanting to enjoy a healthy addition to their diet. Preserved food that is not immediately distributed will be stored at the church and at a farm a few miles down the road. Both will serve as a food bank of preserved fruits and vegetables for the taking. Reverend Cox encourages people to return their used jars so they can be refilled later in the season or next summer.

St. Alban's has also invited mothers from House of Hope and members of the Barceda Families teen parenting class in Bolivar to participate in the canning process and take home the healthy finished products. Nick Utecht, 28, sees the value of younger people learning food preservation techniques. "There are so many good things going on. The older generation is teaching the younger one something they can learn together and be proud of in the end. And anything that can get people to eat healthier will make their lives that much better," says Nick.

Lessons learned

Much has been learned in the few months since Cannables was started. What surprised Romain Morgan the most was how everyone was on board with this project. "We all know that if we belong to any group, there is always a naysayer, but there has not been one complainer or one person who says we should not do this. Many other faith communities in Bolivar and surrounding towns have looked to St. Alban's as a wonderful example of a small church doing big things."

Romain says that people are becoming more aware that they need to help others and eat healthy. She hopes that the project continues and catches on elsewhere. At the same time, members of St. Alban's hope that anybody and everybody will take advantage of this program—and improve their diets along the way. Says Reverend Cox, "We want to destroy the idea that there are the needy and then the rest of us who 'help.' We hope we might begin to create a community of givers across those lines because all of us need to learn how to live in a recession (and afterward!) in a more humane way, and this is one good way to begin."

Web resource

St. Alban's Episcopal Church: www.stalbansozarks.org/index.html



[Church member Romain Morgan]