

## In Support of a Church Garden: A Problem-Solution Letter

March 7, 2014

Dear Pastor -----,

I am writing today in response to the recent launch of *Living Hope Church's* food pantry, *Living Pantry*. The pantry is a huge step towards helping our neighbors in need, and I am proud to be part of this new ministry. The anxiety experienced by the working poor is something I personally identify with, because I was one of them. Laid off four years ago, my husband spent nearly 10 months out of work. Relying solely on my meager income, we struggled with basic financial decisions. Medical needs were postponed to pay rent. Electricity or water bills were often delayed in favor of buying groceries. The consistently unpaid bills were always behind by one cycle, damaging our credit. Looking back, we rejected help from food pantries because we truly didn't consider ourselves "that" desperate. There were always people "worse off" than we were. Somehow managing to squeak by, we didn't want people to think we were irresponsible, or lazy. Avoiding the judgment that came along with requesting assistance, we plodded through. Ultimately, my husband was able to secure a new job, and we have recovered greatly from our situation. Many are not that fortunate.

After working firsthand with the individuals who the pantry serves, I recognize that we have an immediate opportunity to expand this ministry. There are two problems with the current operation of the pantry. First, thirty-four percent of households in Cook County with income below the national poverty line have at least one working adult, and twenty-two percent state that the majority of their income is from a job ("Hunger in Chicago"). Employed, they still cannot make enough money to meet the basic needs of their families. Working full time (and often multiple jobs), these families have less time and energy to actively plan healthy meals, or to shop for healthy alternatives at the store. The Living Pantry is only available between 10:45 am and 2:45 pm on Thursdays, which significantly limits its outreach to the working poor.

Secondly, the working poor tend to delay or decline seeking assistance specifically because of the associated stigma, and the shame they feel in being incapable of providing for their families. These same individuals will be less likely to come to the church for fear of being judged either by volunteers, or by outsiders who may see them participating in the program ("In Short Supply"). When interviewed, SNAP (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program) participants tell stories of people behind them in the grocery store putting them down. They overhear comments like "I should have known better than to come to the store on the first of the month," and "all these losers and their food stamps –my hard-earned tax dollars," and "I could never eat as well as these people and I work for a living," ("Hunger In Your Community"). Imagine the impact of those words on a single parent working three jobs to make ends meet!

Providing a church-based community garden would give our church a unique ministry opportunity that extends beyond the produce of the garden or the output of the food pantry. Families who may not currently participate in the food pantry would have the opportunity to volunteer at various times during the week to maintain the garden, enabling them to work around their schedules. By helping to maintain the garden, these families can also avoid the perceived

embarrassment and humility of taking “handouts” or of being judged at the grocery store. They can directly impact their own well-being, while also helping others like them.

You are probably thinking “We don’t have the funds or resources to start a project like this.” I understand your concern. Projects lacking in resources are prone to fail or at least yield mediocre outcomes. In the cases of ministries, failure can cause more harm than good. The great thing about this garden project is that it requires very little funding, and can be cared for by a handful of volunteers. Using church property, we can save money and transportation of the produce to the food pantry. The garden’s success will also be visible to our church community, inspiring participation. In the event the church does not have available land, the Schaumburg Park District hosts a community garden approximately two miles from Living Hope Church. Renting a plot costs a mere \$25 per year for 324 square feet. These plots are tilled twice each year, and are ready for planting by mid-April, with little preparation required. Working with local nurseries, we can obtain seeds, transplants and other supplies for little or no cost. Between church volunteers and pantry participants, there will be a strong workforce to maintain the garden.

You may also be thinking that “we receive plenty of donations from local businesses to supplement the pantry.” While it is true that the pantry receives many donations from local businesses, they are often in the form of bread, and shelf-stable products such as boxed dinners, pasta, canned vegetables or soups, and powdered milk. Providing participants with the opportunity to grow their own fresh vegetables will enable them to eat fresher, nutrient-rich meals. It will also serve as a platform to promote food-security through gardening. A 100 square foot garden can produce up to \$700 worth of produce over the course of a season (Creasey and Wilkinson-Barash).

Community vegetable gardens appear throughout history as a means for people to join together to meet a common need. Called liberty gardens during World War I, and victory gardens during World War II, they were promoted by the US government as a way to supplement the food supply. In response to national food shortages, the government instituted extensive public campaigns encouraging people to plant gardens. By 1943, there were over 20 million victory gardens, providing approximately 40% of the nation’s total food supply (“Faith Based”). Not only did these gardens provide much needed nutrition, but they also brought communities together, and encouraged social involvement.

In addition to providing nutritional food for the *Living Pantry*, participation in a church garden will connect people within our community, uniting them towards a common purpose. In his scholarly article “Connecting food environments and health through the relational nature of aesthetics: insight through the community gardening experience,” James Hale and his co-authors discuss the relational perspective of community gardening. By strengthening inter-personal bonds, urban communities can foster a supportive environment that enables people to better handle life experiences. For example, gardeners tend to exhibit a level of trust in one another, and collective pride in the final product. The knowledge that one’s actions can directly impact the outcome of the group instills accountability, and creates an unspoken “social agreement that builds cohesion within a group.” People “create emotional connections to other people in the garden” (Hale et al.). A church-based garden can represent a safe environment where people help and support each other. The connections that form can pave the way for ministry, lead to

more personalized assistance for those in need, and work to weaken the stigma associated with asking for help.

Our neighbors down the road, the Covenant Church of Schaumburg, maintain a garden each year. You may have heard of their *One Ton Garden*, which produced over 1,000 pounds of food in 2011, and over 2,000 pounds in 2012 to benefit the Schaumburg Food Bank (“One Ton Garden”). The success of the Covenant Church’s efforts provides tangible evidence that community garden projects are successful. I urge our church community to join the growing ranks of food pantries and food banks that incorporate gardens into their programs.

Implementing a community garden will enhance *Living Hope’s* pantry outreach. It is a low-cost solution to the pantry’s current limitations, and will meet nutritional needs while also providing community support for our neighbors, our friends, our brothers and sisters in Christ. Let us work alongside those in need. Let us meet them where they are, and treat them with the dignity and respect we would ourselves yearn for in our weakest moments.

Sincerely,

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Church member and Living Pantry Volunteer

## Works Cited

- Creasey, Rosalind, and Cathy Wilkinson-Barash. "Edible landscaping – Grow \$700 Worth of Food in 100 Square Feet!" *Mother Earth News*. January 2010. Web. 15 Feb 2014.
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- Hale, James, Corrine Knapp, Lisa Bardwell, Michael Buchenau, Julie Marshall, Fahriye Sancar, and Jill S. Litt. "Connecting food environments and health through the relational nature of aesthetics: insight through the community gardening experience". *Social Science & Medicine*, 72.11 (2011): 1853-1863. Print.
- "Hunger in Chicago." *Greater Chicago Food Depository*, n.d. Web. 16 Feb 2014.
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