

# Farming for Transformation

*CONNECTIONS had a few questions for Brenna Wright, founder of Abbey Fields, Knoxville, an urban farm project. She is a member of Old North Abbey, and her husband deacon Aaron is the pastoral leader there.*

**Brenna, thanks for taking the time to share the story of your farm with CONNECTIONS. Please tell us about one experience you've had where God's grace just "showed up" in your life.**

God's grace has always been extremely evident to me in the created world. I grew up a Kansas girl, a place with wonderful sunsets and terrifying storms.

I can remember climbing a cottonwood tree that looked over a wheat field across the street from my house (it sounds land of Oz-ish but I promise it's true) and watching storms move into our town. I loved the way the wheat sounded in the wind and

how everything felt so wild and alive.

There have been many times in my life that I have doubted the presence of God, until I walked outside and tried to explain away the colors of the sky or how rain makes things grow. I have always found grace and awe in this.

**How does community farming work? What are the nuts and bolts of making it run?**

The sort of farming we're doing in Knoxville is a little different than the normal model for community farming/gardening. Abbey Fields operates as a for profit venture to ensure the farm's sustainability as well as to provide adequate income for people who wish to make farming their vocation. In our model, we take a blighted urban lot and using conservation tactics and permaculture design, turn it into a full working farm. This way we can ensure the land is well cared for as well as the community involved, and that beautifying is an ongoing process above and below the soil surface. The traditional sense of community farming is good in concept (where lots are provided and anyone can come freely

to work a plot of ground), and can work in particular areas of the city (i.e. immigrant or refugee communities, or in my experience, aging communities because these are the folks that have some idea of how and what to farm) but generally, in most communities, you get very excited participants in April and then by June, when it really starts getting hot, you're left with an over run lot of weeds and renegade vegetables that no one wants to see.

Abbey Fields will instead operate with a manager, staff and volunteers and will be supported through CSA shares (community supported agriculture), meaning folks in the community can buy a share to the farm (half or full) and then in turn are given a basket of veggies each week. We do have work shares for folks who are really sold on learning the basics of farming or maybe do not have the funds but have some extra time to work for a share.

**How is the Gospel lived out through community farming?**

Farming helps us to come back to the basic realities of life. As Fred Bahnson puts it in his book *Soil and Sacra-*

*ment*: "To think of food sacramental is something the industrial world hungers for but cannot name." When we feel the changing of seasons, and cook a meal using food that we've seen through from seed to harvest, we eat that meal differently. We're thankful, more thoughtful, and we realize that time spent in the garden is time well spent. We also need to work, really work, beside each other in this way. Side-by-side in a joint effort to make things beautiful, to realize that not everything is fixed by just talking about it, and that God was on to something when he created this great and mysterious world.

**How are families and children involved on the farm?**

We have work days that are open to community members, during these we have ample attendance from families and kiddos. In time, we will begin moving towards some educational endeavors.

This summer we have a group of neighborhood kids coming to the farm once a week, we hope to be able to teach basic gardening skills, as well as providing a space for kids to run and play. There will also be a monthly gleanings of the fields where neighborhood members are welcome to pick anything remaining from that crop succession.

There has been some interest in the homeschooling community to incorporate study days on the farm in their curriculum, this is just in the beginning stages but I'm super stoked about this possibility.

**Our churches are spread out across Georgia and the southeast. What if some of our local communities wanted to start farm communities? Where would we start?**

It's as easy as finding a plot of land, having someone dedicated to seeing the project through, and lots of patience as you learn the wonderfully

pain staking journey of crop production. There are a vast number of models you could choose to use for your community. Some churches start gardens for the poor in which everything that is grown is given to charity.

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There are market models where you grow food to take to farmers markets. These are especially successful in the refugee communities, and provide revenue and good work for folks looking to get settled in. Our farm is development supported, meaning I proposed the idea of this farm to the developers and they agreed to give me land access and start-up costs. Development supported agriculture is actually catching on around the country and many new neighborhoods are being built with farms rather than golf courses or tennis courts.

This was an absolute dream of mine, and I can hardly believe I'm getting the opportunity to make it happen. So I would tell folks (without sounding too advice-ish), if you see it then go for it, because a garden is always a good idea.

Visit [www.abbey-fields.com](http://www.abbey-fields.com) for more information.

