

Church takes ministry back to the garden

By Jennie Key



Produce from Colerain Township farmer Cliff Dziech's garden now provides fresh produce to SON Ministries, the FreeStore Food Bank and Camp Washington Church of Christ for distribution to needy families.



Retired Colerain Township farmer Cliff Dziech looks over his peach crop. Members of St. Paul United Church of Christ on Old Blue Rock Road are now working in the fields and giving away the harvest as a ministry of the church.

The Bible begins in a garden, and the book is rife with farm images of sowing and reaping, crops and first fruits.

So it's not really a surprise to find a congregation toiling in the fields.

Volunteers from the St. Paul United Church of Christ on Old Blue Rock Road are working on member Cliff Dziech's family farm in Colerain Township.

He's retired from a long career of farming and farm management – on the Ruoff family farm, the Gorman Farm, Cincinnati Nature Center and the Longbranch farm. And when he was done with those farms, he planted a large truck garden and maintained the orchards on his small farm in Colerain Township, selling his produce at area farmers markets.

After the death of his wife Peggy last year, Cliff, 71, said there didn't seem to be a lot of reason to keep farming. It's hard work, and not very lucrative. But it was hard to let his orchards and the neat garden rows he has tilled and planted so many years go to seed.

So he went to his pastor at St. Paul UCC, Michelle Torigian, with a proposal: if the congregation would help him farm, the church could give the crop away to needy families.

"I thought this was such a great idea when Cliff brought it to us," Torigian said. "It is wonderful to be able to use the gifts we have to serve our community. When we do what we are called to do, we experience joy. As a church, we want to listen to what God would have us do and focus on that. We are called to use whatever we have for him.

"Even though we are a small congregation, they embraced this and lot of our members have been engaged. Cliff brought the spark."

That spark caught on quickly. In February, the pruners came, shaping up the garden for the coming spring. Weeder and planters also came to the farm, doing their part for the harvest. Now, the crops are coming in, and volunteers come every morning to pick whatever is ripe and ready to go.

So far this summer more than 1,000 pounds of produce has made their way to needy people. At Camp Washington United Church of Christ, the fresh produce is not only being distributed to families, but youngsters at the church's day camp are getting the chance to bite into a green bean fresh from the garden and taste the sticky sweetness of fresh-picked peaches and let its juiciness run down their chins.

Volunteer Larry Ridener says while the work is hot, the payoff is very cool.

"This is such a neat thing to be a part of," the retired Northwest schools teacher said. "It's simple, but it's so effective. This is really good food we are providing to agencies that do a lot of good. They are so excited to get fresh produce when we deliver it."

SON Ministries in Colerain Township, the FreeStore Food Bank, Evendale Community Church and the Camp Washington United Church of Christ have been receiving produce from the garden, and some of the fruits and veggies are being sold at the College Hill Farmers Market to offset the cost of running the truck farm.

For his part, Cliff says he's not doing anything extraordinary.

"I feel like I am the one getting so much out of this," he said. "I love working in the garden. And I learned I like having people around the place. It feels really good."