

Winter eNews 2016



Don't Miss
Hang Out Weekend 2016!
Feb 12-14

Join us at the Farm for a refreshing weekend of prayer, sledding, games, home-grown delicious food, sitting by the wood stove, and the whole B-Farm Bunch!

Register now to reserve your spot, priority deadline is Feb 1st!

State of the Farm 2016

by Eric Fitts

Well, it's time for my annual State of the Farm address. I am happy to report that the state of the Farm is strong! Seriously though, we celebrated our 11th birthday in Chicago last month with 150ish of our closest friends and it caused me to think back on the year that was, our theme this year: *Praise Be!*, and what the future holds. The event had a net income of over \$18,000, which is our second-highest result and will be a huge help in

getting us out and serving this year.

[Didn't get around to donating for the benefit, but meant to? Click here to give.](#)

The Year that Was

With the majority of the Caretaker Residence work behind us, we were able to focus even more on our core mission: transforming lives, service with the local community, and the teaching of sustainable practices.

Transforming Lives: Our Sunday Visitor granted us funding again to improve the service-retreat program through developing pre-trip resources for groups, among other aspects of the Our Sunday Visitor Catechetical Initiative.

Serving with the local community: In 2015, we hosted 40 different groups totaling 387 volunteers from 13 states. These volunteers contributed 11,600 hours of free labor to the local community. Combined with the free labor of the Caretakers, this translated to \$292,000 of donated labor invested in our local community through 50 home repair and improvement projects. We also began a partnership with the Alderson Food Hub with Lauren serving as an AmeriCorps member working to develop the local food system.

Teaching sustainable practices: We had a great harvest in the garden and orchard, which will only grow over time, thanks in part to proceeds from the John & Ann Churley Memorial Fund, which allowed us to plant a terraced blueberry patch and increase our number of beehives.

All of this was only possible through the hard work of Caretakers, Summer Servants, Participants, and donors. With five new Caretakers joining us this year, we now have a full community of nine Caretakers, one Farmer-in-Residence, one Caretaker Community Member who works off the Farm, and the 2 kids-13 of us altogether!

Praise Be!

We were heartened this year by the promulgation of Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si': On Care of Our Common Home*. It affirmed us in the importance of our mission to this world and to this Church, while also challenging us to dive deeper into the themes of creation care, service with the poor, and reading the signs of the times. One phrase from the encyclical sticks out to me: "Once more we see that realities are more important than ideas." Caretaker emeritus Matt Hubbard recently shared with me:

"I would suggest that of all the beautiful words and flowery language that I heard/spoke at Bethlehem Farm, they were never just ideas, I experienced realities; realities of human communities living in tune with ecosystems and realities of loving resolution to conflicts and realities of neighbors and realities of God in all things."

Bethlehem Farm is strongly-positioned to implement the call of *Laudato Si'* to bring our care of creation from the realm of idea into real life. Pope Francis says:

Environmental education should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning. It needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people...to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care." (209, 210)

Bethlehem Farm provides an environment that encourages both the depth of faith and skill in practical living to live out the call for the kind of environmental education that can save this world from its own excesses. Praise Be to God for all the goodness of the earth and for our call to care for it!

What will the future hold?

Transforming lives: We are working on developing strategies to extend the Bethlehem Farm experience beyond the service-retreat week: post-trip meeting resources, "Empowering Student Leaders in Faith" in each of our regions across the country (pending funding), fully integrating *Laudato Si': On Care of Our Common Home* into our service-retreat program, always with an eye on how to be better disciples and pass on that vision to others.

Service with the local community: We are seeking out ways to further train site leaders for the home repair program, and extending our creation care efforts through Lauren's involvement with the local food system and Farmer Tim's service with local sustainable farmers.

Teaching sustainability: The board has approved the second phase of the solar panel expansion, which will bring us from 1/3 to 2/3 of our electricity produced by solar power. We are also planning on completing the Retreat House solar hot water project, which will make our hot water 100% solar for most of the year.

And we are working on retiring our debt from the Caretaker Residence to focus even sharper on enhancing our core mission (\$120,000 down, \$109,000 to go!)

So, we have good things to look forward to in the year to come. Beyond that, the board and Caretaker Community are in the midst of renewing our Master Plan, with help from Chip Williamson, who led us through our last Master Plan. Last time, Master Planning resulted in the construction of the Caretaker Residence, among other good things. We welcome your input as our Master Plan for the next 3 years develops and bears fruit. Please keep us in your prayers this new year.

HEY YOU!



Interested in becoming a Summer Servant? Priority deadline for applications is February 17st. Apply on our [Website](#)

Some of Our Winter Projects

Solar Hot Water: Phase 2

by Kim

One beautiful Fall day, Eric asked who would be interested in heading up the second phase of our solar hot water project. Phase 2 will provide hot water heated by the sun (not propane) for the retreat house's showers, sinks, and washing machine. Unaware of what I was getting myself into, I happily volunteered expecting to pour some concrete piers for the frames to sit on and finishing before the first snowfall. Prepping the piers involved some unexpected adventures such as rerouting a gray water pipe with Richard, a 2-day extravaganza. I had a few guest helpers from Jerusalem Farm and Nazareth Farm on the day we mixed and poured the concrete. After finishing the piers, I learned why I thought this project would be so simple. All the piping and wiring is underground! More digging, lots more digging... The trenches that would hide and insulate the hot water pipes have to be 30 inches deep and at least 6 inches wide. A couple days go by shoveling with fellow caretakers, and I think we're finished. Then a surprise visit from the professional plumber who will be hooking up our system reveals that I have "skimpy ditches." I took this comment with a chuckle as I thought to myself, "back to the trenches!" While widening the trenches, I also cut a hole through the basement wall for the main pipe to enter the house. There is still a lot of work to be done including building another structure to support two tanks that will heat water for the retreat house's kitchen and laundry. I have high hopes of finishing the 6 new systems by the first sunny days of Spring!

Congratulations

to Our 10th Anniversary Raffle Winners!

Colleen-made quilted wall hanging: won by Scott and JoAnn Haner

Made-to-Order knitted item by Marianna Lo: won by Mike and Mary Jo Schoendorf

Framed Virginia Waterfall photograph by Roy Buckland: won by Martha and Dave Lester

Where Have You Seen God This Week?

by Carly Ann

Where have you seen God this week? Anyone who has been on a group week at the farm knows these words. A caretaker asks this question as we all gather in the prayer area and we pass around a wooden cross, each opening up about the way we have seen love present in our week. This question can be intimidating, exciting and a little hard to answer. But during my first two weeks as a caretaker my answer was obvious: Tank and Wanda Sears.



The Sears met each other growing up on Elk Knob Road above Hinton and lived most of their lives in Richmond, VA, before moving back to their hometown after Jimmy (affectionately called "Tank", a nickname from high school football days) retired from the contracting business. In October we began to build them a new porch that would solve the problems they've been having with using their front door in the snow. Their old porch was often covered up to the door knob in snow. Tank loves to tell the story of how Wanda would have to climb out the window to go shovel them out. Although this is a very funny story to tell volunteers, it was clear that they very much needed a larger porch with a roof and walls so that Tank could get out in his Hoveround in the winter.

Wanda was grateful to have our help and elated to have our company. Our first few mornings Wanda would offer us coffee, which usually only Richard or a few volunteers accepted. Then came the fateful morning that Wanda put out a cake for us; the volunteers loved it. That was the beginning of the end. Every day after that Wanda had a freshly made cake waiting for us when we arrived. Everyone would get a piece except Richard, who would get two. It was in this time where Wanda and Tank would tell the volunteers the story of how they met, explain the pictures on the wall, and tease each other mercilessly. It was beautiful to see Wanda smack Tank on the back of the head, then gently drape her arms around him, pat his forehead and kiss his big bald head saying "I can't tell you all just

how grateful for what you kids are doing for us" or "I just wish I could adopt every one of you". Every day I saw the Sears fall in love with a new group of kids. Every evening at Review of the Day I saw how much their hospitality impacted the volunteers. Every week the answer to that portentous question came easy.

Ushering In a Year of Mercy

A reflection on the Pope's call to Mercy by the Caretakers

On December 8th, 2015, the feast day of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary as well as the 11th anniversary of the birth of Bethlehem Farm, several of us from the Caretaker community gathered at St. Mary of the Greenbrier Catholic Church in Alderson to celebrate not only these two occasions but also the opening day of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy declared by Pope Francis. What follows are the thoughts and reactions of 3 Caretakers at the onset of this historical year for the Church:



Jena Barnhill

I believe the announcement of a Holy Year of Mercy is God calling all of us to exemplify Christ as we examine ourselves and embrace His mercy and forgiveness. Most importantly, this jubilee year calls us to extend God's mercy to our fellow man no matter the costs. Forgiveness does not come easily, nor does it come without consequence. Whether one is extending or receiving forgiveness, there is always a certain amount burden involved. The consequences of sin cannot be overcome without effort and should not be taken lightly. Where there is sin, there is discomfort because sin separates us from God. Christ's teachings on mercy and forgiveness were not concerned with our comfort. Instead, His example calls us to imitate God's mercy at all costs. Christ's cost was death on a cross! He gave His life that we may have life eternal. A gift freely given...the ultimate gift of mercy.

Therefore, may we heed the call of the Holy Year of Mercy and participate in the sacrament of confession, true repentance, and the extension of forgiveness to all. In doing this, may our burdens be cast before the cross, and may we be restored unto God to live out our lives glorifying Him as we serve others.

How far are we honestly willing to go to imitate the mercy of God? What will be your answer when Christ asks, "What have you done for the 'least of these'?" (Matt 25:31-46).

Richard Storey

Much like just about everything else in his Papacy, the Jubilee Year of Mercy

declared by Pope Francis is immensely exciting. There are so many things to celebrate in this Jubilee, but what stands out to me is Pope Francis' call to Reconciliation, the sacrament of mercy and forgiveness. As one who has found immense grace and peace in this sacrament, I am filled with profound hope for our Church as she is called to "place the Sacrament of Reconciliation at the centre once more in such a way that it will enable people to touch the grandeur of God's mercy with their own hands. For every penitent, it will be a source of true interior peace." That is my hope: true peace and healing for all those suffering the consequences of sin. My hope is also in our entire Christian family that we might embrace mercy and make gains for the reconciliation of all Christians to full communion with God and each other. I pray that all might humbly encounter this beautiful sacrament and welcome with open hearts Pope Francis' Missionaries of Mercy he will send this Lent. The Gospel of Mercy has fundamentally affected me, and I am excited and hopeful to see how it affects our Church.

Carley Knapp

With his declaration of the Year of Mercy that began in December, Pope Francis is asking a lot of us Christians. Among other things, he has asked us to perform the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy daily, pray the Divine Chaplet of Mercy daily, participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation frequently, forgive those who have wronged us, and make time to read and reflect upon Scripture regularly. As if that isn't a big enough task, he is encouraging Christians to go on pilgrimage with the opening of Holy Doors at cathedrals and other shrines around the world, AND he is hoping we Christians will engage in achieving a deeper understanding of Judaism, Islam, and other world religions. That's a tall order for one year!

With the level of division we are facing in the world right now and especially in our own country, maybe this is just the kind of challenge we need. Political polarization seems to be worsening instead of improving, and reactions to violence globally make religious and racial misunderstandings ever more apparent. This Year of Mercy may be more than we asked for, but entering into it could bring healing beyond our imaginations.

Your parish probably has a nice brochure highlighting different aspects of the Jubilee Year of Mercy if you want to read more. You can also check out the Vatican's website for the Jubilee Year: <http://www.im.va/content/gdm/en.html>.

A few shout-outs for some outstanding donations at year end:

Bike & Build, Inc., Bob & Pauline Hanich, Wheaton Franciscan Sisters, Tim Buck, Oscar & Patrice Valenzuela, Tim Duffy, Anne Barnes & Joe Hoffman, Braun Building Center, Beth & Jim Stecher, and Kathleen Puhl

And special thanks also to members of our Monthly Giving Circle:

Carrie & Andrew Archual, Sue Augustus, Matt Bono, Jay Carney, Michael Deines, Liz Drapa*, Anna (Wright) Ebbers, Eric & Colleen Fitts*, Katie Feise*, Brent* & Amanda Fernandez, Anthony Ferrari, Adam & Lucy Fischer*, Alice Foreman, Bob Gill, John Hannagan, Hayley Very & Andrew Harmon, Rachel Kraus, Lauren LaCoy, Randal & Dawna Lewis, Mariana Lo*, John & Chris Marasi, Kera & Scott McNelis*, Bob Neary, Michael Newman, Laura & John O'Donnell, Lisa (& Ransome) Patterson, Sharyl Pels*, Frederick Pratt*, Andy Rebollar & Andi Grandy*, Bob & Pat Rebollar, Sarah & Tom Rooney, Sarah Rose, Tim Shovlin, Marc Slain, Amy & De Spurlock, Jake & Alicen Teitgen*, Joe & Julie Tracy-Prieboy*, Nick Vergatos, Mary Williams, and Katie Wiggins.

*current & former Caretakers & board members

[That's a boss group of people; I'd like to become a monthly donor!](#)

[That sounds nice. I can't commit now, but here's a one-time gift.](#)

Caretakers

Colleen and Eric Fitts
Jena Barnhill
Kim Bremer
Carly Ann Braun
Carley Knapp
Mary Catherine McDonald
Tim Peregoy
Lauren Schoendorf
Richard Storey

Board Members

Scott McNelis (chair)
Jake Teitgen (vice-chair)
Caitlin Morneau (treasurer)
Kathryn Moran (secretary)
Paul Daugherty
Frederick Pratt
Fr. Arthur Bufogle
Sharyl Pels
Brian Suehs-Vassel
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Check out the Farm on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#)

Our Sunday Visitor

Special Thanks to Our Sunday Visitor for their generous grant

Thanks for reading!